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Contest*

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Year

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Putting Students To The Test

35

Highest ACT score earned by the class of 2010 so far.

2250

Highest SAT score earned by the class of 2010 so far.

2

Number of Mount Michael students who have gotten perfect ACT scores in the past 10 years.

13

Number of 2010 seniors who have taken a test prep course.

Don't Stress Over Tests

By JOSH COX *Standardized test scores not as important as students may think*

Standardized testing has been a norm since most people can remember. In fact, The American College Test (ACT) celebrates its 50th birthday this year. Yes, students have been painstakingly filling in bubbles with soft lead #2 pencils since before 1959 (careful to fill in the oval completely and exclusively). Many students wonder why standardized testing is so widely used and why tests like the ACT and SAT seem to have so much weight in college admissions decisions.

Mount Michael students are no strangers to standardized tests by the time they graduate. As freshmen they take the PLAN, as sophomores they take both the PLAN and the PSAT, as juniors they take the PSAT and either the ACT or SAT, and as seniors, they can choose to take the ACT and/or SAT again for college admissions.

"I'm not a big fan of standardized tests. They seem to make a pretty big difference in which colleges people get into and the amount of scholarships they get, which is a lot of weight to put on one morning's worth of testing. It's pretty easy for a person to choke come the day of the test," senior Josh Devereaux said. However, according to Guidance Counselor Father Stephen Plank, standardized tests don't hold as much weight to colleges as many students think.

"The first thing colleges look at is the college level courses students have taken. Then they look at AP courses, then electives and curriculum, and then they look at the standardized test scores."

Plank says this varies from school to school but is more or less in that order.

College admissions are not the only purpose of standardized tests, however. The state of Nebraska requires that schools test students in grades four, seven, and eleven and report the results. This is so the state can ensure that schools are keeping up with the No Child Left Behind Act put in place by president George W. Bush.

Regardless of their use, standardized tests have been around for a long time and it doesn't seem like that is going to change anytime soon.

Test Prep Frenzy Gets Out Of Hand

By GUNHEE PARK

"These courses repetitively train you for the test by teaching you problem solving skills and making you memorize vocabularies," senior Baekho Jang said. As high school students get ready for colleges, one of the first things they have to do is take either the ACT or the SAT. Since it is critical for students to get a good score on these tests, it is becoming more common for them to take prep courses.

However, with more demands, these courses seem to be getting out of hand. Especially for foreign students, it is becoming almost a necessity to take these classes over the summer. "I started going before my junior year," said Jang. With so many students, the academies are pumping up the prices that seem ridiculous. "Mine could be considered as pretty cheap and it was still \$1000 per month. Other academies can cost up to \$3000 per month," said Jang.

In Korea, these SAT academies started flourishing about a decade ago when the number of students that study in the United States started to rise rapidly. What these academies do is repetitively train the students by teaching them SAT solving skills and memorizing words. Jang said, "They are helpful especially for those whose native language is not English. For us, we need to learn certain methods to approach the problems that come naturally for native speakers."

Thus, students who attend these academies over the summer go from twice a week to even six times a week. They can take classes that go for three hours per day all the way to even seven hours per day. When asked if these hectic hours of studying for the SAT could limit the students' creativity, Jang said, "I don't think so. Students that go to these academies are actually building a firm fundamental foundation and this will further foster creativity in the future."

The situation in America seems like it is getting more intense as well. Almost all students who have taken the ACT or SAT at Mount Michael has taken a prep course at least once. When asked how the courses helped, senior Anthony Thiele said, "I think they help you beat the test but not necessarily teach you anything." Without even taking any courses, Thiele has gotten a decent score on the test. "If I wanted to get a good score on the test, I want it to be because I was smart enough to get that score, not because I understood the test logics that were trying to be tricky," he said.

Students Call for Corrections to Standardized Tests

By ALEX LIM

In 2007, James Palmer, a high school senior from Framingham High School in Massachusetts, received 2350 out of 2400 on the Scholastic Aptitude Test after hours of hard work. However, he found out that he was rejected from most of the prestigious schools where he applied. Most of the admission directors at these colleges consented that his high SAT score failed to correspond with his overall academic record: he maintained a grade point average of 3.2 throughout high school, which is just above average. The admission directors concluded that his intelligence level did not match up with such a lofty score on the SAT.

Nowadays, the ACT and the SAT, the standardized tests for college admission, are being criticized for having flaws such as their money-oriented strategies, race and gender biases, and weak predictive values. It is reported that these tests fail to mirror the intelligence level of high school applicants.

Numerous people criticize the ACT and the SAT for their excessive focus on economic profits. In March 2005, the College Board published the new SAT with the inclusion of the writing section which was optional and separate from the old SAT. Consequently, the added exam section increased the price for students: the basic registration fee has risen by \$12 to \$41.50.

"These SAT revisions might be a great marketing strategy, but the test is still a terrible educational tool," said Will Wetzel, founder of Students Against Testing.

Additionally, in 2009, the College Board changed its policy to allow students to submit only their best test score to the admission office, which greatly encouraged students to take the test many more times, and thus, pay more. Previously, students were obligated to submit in their application all of the test scores they had received; thus, students had limited opportunities to improve their scores. However, numerous students are now spending more and more money for higher scores.

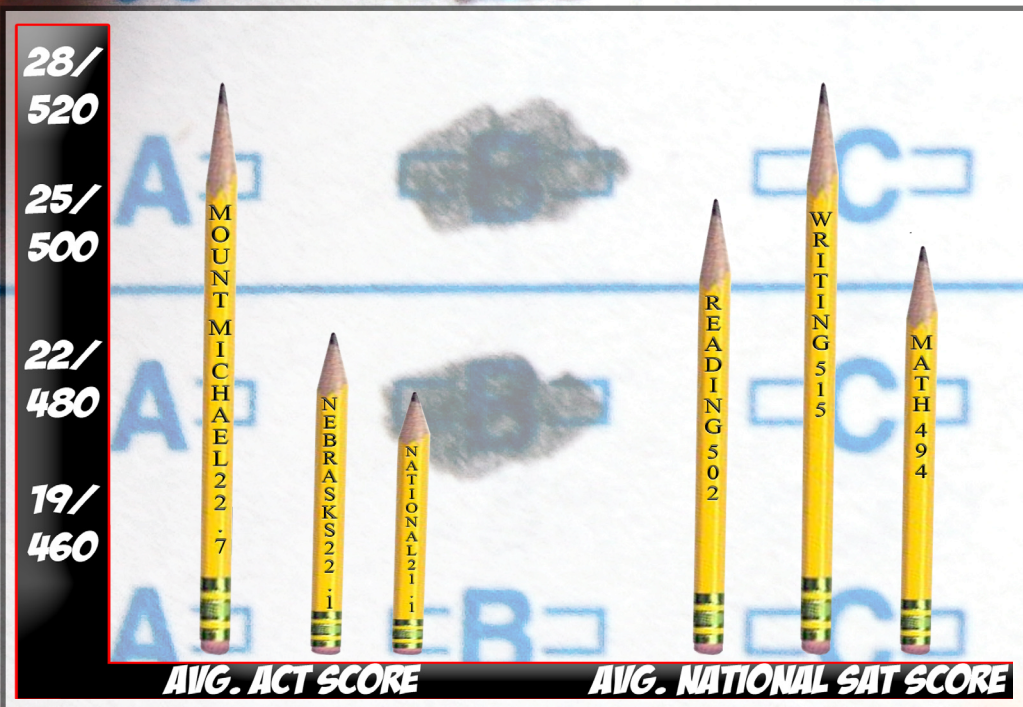
"The only certain result from the SAT is increased profits for the test-coaching industry, including the College Board," added Wetzel.

Another major flaw of the ACT and the SAT is its essay section, which increments biases against students whose first language is not English. "Drafting several short paragraphs in a few minutes in a testing center is not a fair measurement of how well someone can compose a thoughtful, coherent essay in college. The time pressure will make this a particularly unfair test for students who need to translate from their mother tongue to English," said Sandra Del Valle, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund staff attorney.

Even if the ACT contains some mathematical calculations and identification of shapes, the test is exceptionally focused on questions that depend on word familiarity, a type of question format that is popular in America. Hence, the test is partial to different racial groups, leading to racial bias in admissions and financial aid formulas that utilize rigid test score requirements.

One of the most condemned features of the standardized tests is their inability to adequately reflect students' aptitude. The ACT and SAT fail to correspond to what students learn in high school. Specifically, it is reported that neither the Critical Reading section of the SAT nor the English Section of the ACT has as close a connection with school teachings as it should.

"It is pretty depressing that the ACT and the SAT with many errors will play a huge role in determining whether the students will get into certain colleges. I think these tests need lots of improvements," said senior Jacob Benes.



Graphic by James Benson

A Look At Testing Alternatives

By JOSH CHARVAT

College, it is the self-proclaimed greatest time of one's life. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the time preparing for the ACT and SAT. The college entrance exams are meant to gauge the test takers' skills and offer a reflection of the student's abilities to the college of their choice. The only problem with this, two-hundred multiple choice questions cannot properly evaluate the thousands and thousands of students who take the test.

The standardized tests that colleges use today are nowhere near perfect. They do not properly rank the students against other students. Every student who takes the test comes from a different background and a different learning system. This division is too shallow. Senior Chaval Punyatanaskchai agreed. He said, "The test is just ABCD, a page and a half does not determine who the student is. If a student does not score well, but has great social and leadership skills, the school would not know that."

A change that would be easy to implement would be to put more emphasis on resumes and past experiences. This would give the colleges a better reflection of the student as a whole instead of a number that suggests their intellect. Senior Dominic Antonelli said, "Resumes should be more important. The ACT does not measure the other aspects of learning like creativity. It just measures rote memorization." Resumes show how a student gets involved, and how they spend their time outside of the classroom. Another alternative would be tests made by the college.

College made tests would allow the school to find out exactly what they wanted to know about the student. This would gauge the student's interest in the school, or could be added as a supplement to the application. It would not have to be long, and could use personality questions similar to one section of the PLAN test. It would accomplish something that the ACT could not--giving insight into what the student is really like.

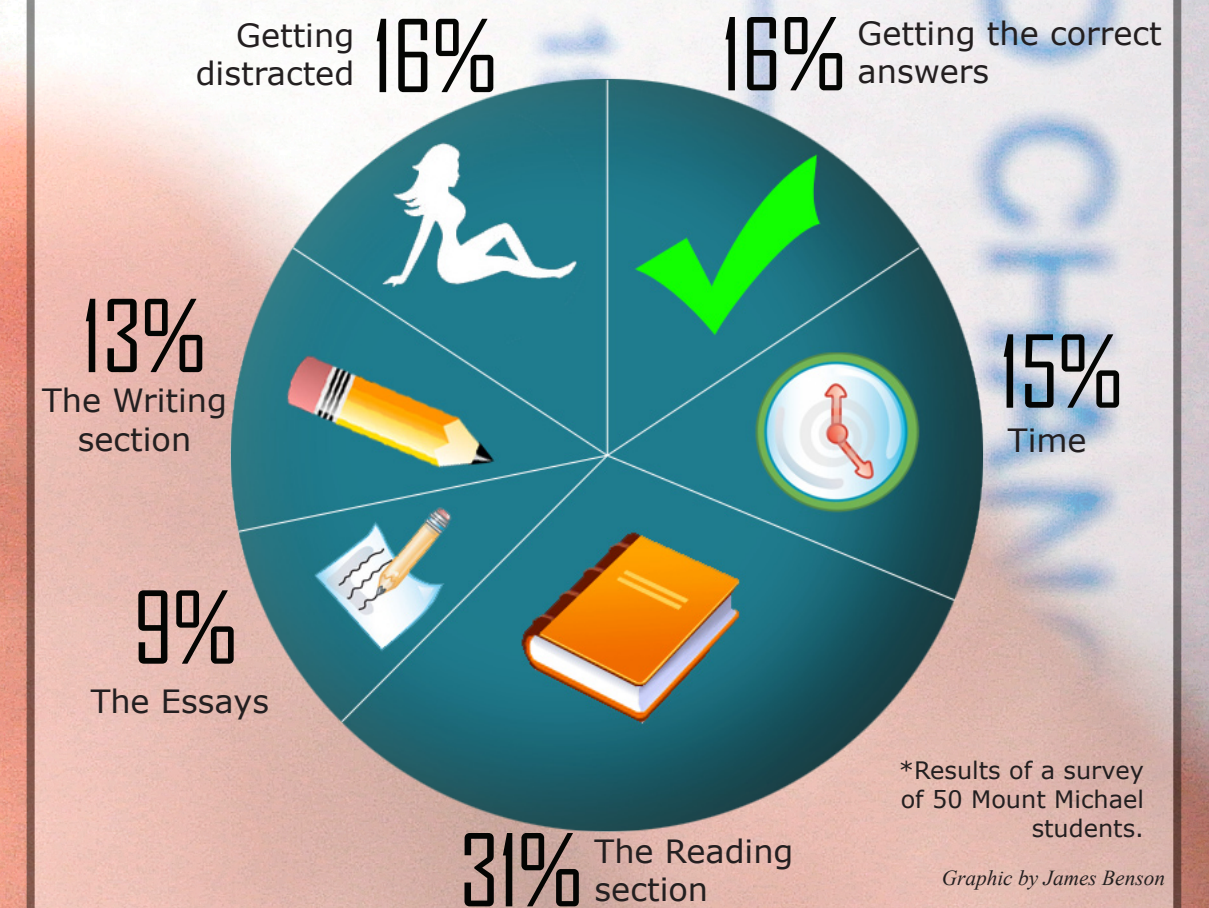
Recently, Ohio University was offered a grant to look into possible assessments. They looked into portfolios, projects, teacher observations, and small-group collaborations. They believed that they should give students an assessment that makes them complete a complex task, rather than a number of multiple choice questions. The best thing about these alternatives would be that it tests students in different ways, because they learn in different ways.

Even with the research going on it is still unclear whether or not alternatives will ever be given the priority. It would be difficult to implement, but in the long run it would do wonders for high school students applying to colleges. Until then seniors will just have to continue looking past the stresses of tests and towards the excitement that awaits in college.



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WHAT IS THE MOST DIFFICULT PART OF STANDARDIZED TESTS?



*Results of a survey of 50 Mount Michael students.

Graphic by James Benson

18

Number of perfect ACT scores in Nebraska in the past 5 years

12

The maximum number of times a student can take the ACT.

23.9

Highest statewide ACT average (Massachusetts)

7

Number of times the SAT is offered yearly.