

SATs in Admissions: A Brief Research Review

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What the research shows: Key points

1. SATs somewhat help in predicting first-year grades, but at a direct cost in access for students from underrepresented groups.
    a. SATs have large socioeconomic gaps - larger than other metrics.
    b. SAT scores' predictive power for college grades derives importantly from their socioeconomic gaps. They are much less informative within groups.
2. Diversity of UC admissions has improved notably without the SAT.
3. Declines in UC student performance in recent years cannot be attributed to the shift to test-free admissions.
4. UC is different from Ivy League schools in its mission and context - its admission policy must differ too.

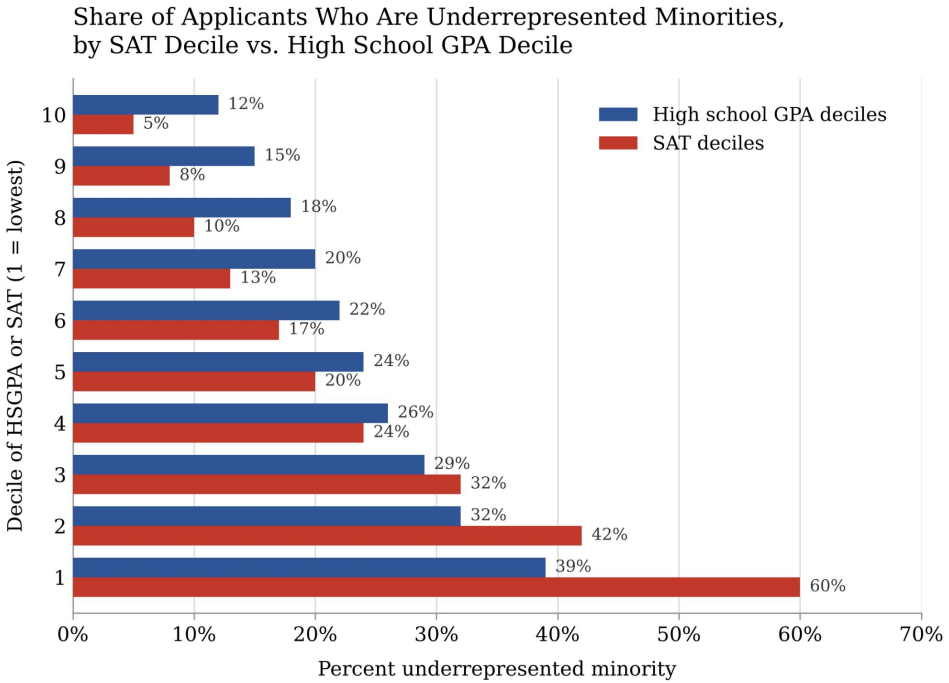
Using SATs in admissions:

- Improves predictions of academic preparedness
- harms diversity



UC Berkeley

SATs have *large* socioeconomic gaps



The top group by GPA is 12% URM.

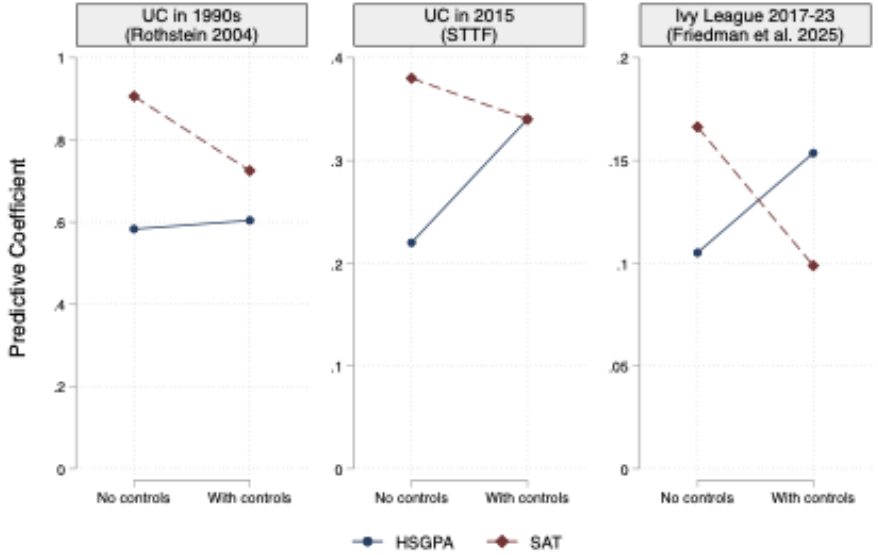
The top group by SAT is just 5% URM.

Source: Geiser, Saul. 2016. "A Proposal to Eliminate the SAT in Berkeley Admissions." Center for Studies in Higher Education, Research and Occasional Paper Series 4.16, May. Data cover 1994-2011.

SATs are predictive, but much of their predictive information is about socioeconomic background

Consistently across studies of prediction of first-year GPA (or other outcomes), SAT coefficient falls and HSGPA coefficient rises when student background is controlled.

→ Much of the SAT's predictive power arises because it measures group differences particularly well.



Note: Scales differ across studies.

UC is admitting more diverse students since it stopped using the SAT

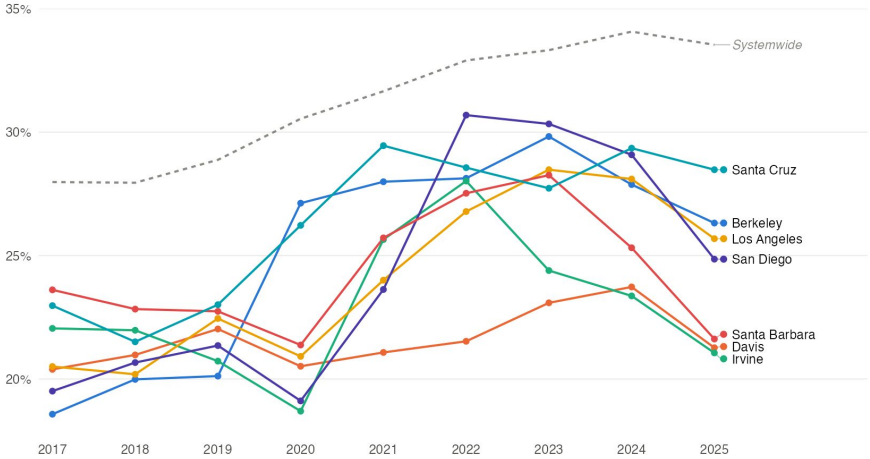


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Admitted students are more diverse at selective UC campuses without the SAT

Black, Latino, and American Indian share of UC freshman admits

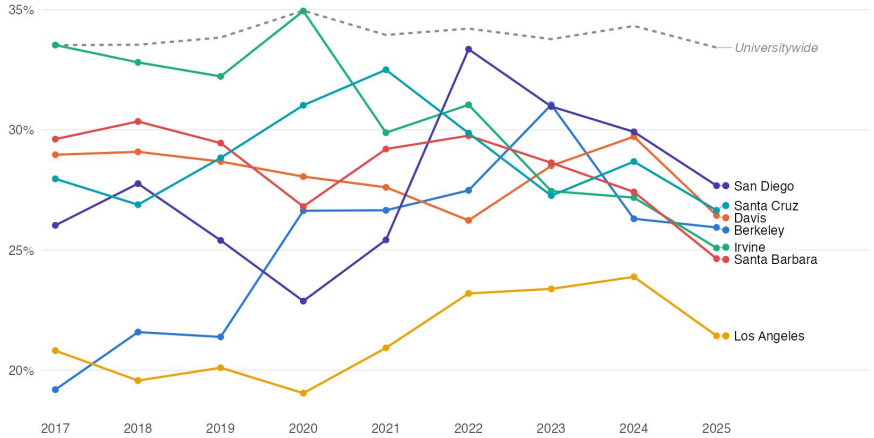
Percent of admitted first-year students who are African American, Hispanic/Latino(a), or American Indian, by campus, fall 2017-2025



Excludes Merced and Riverside.
Share of all admits, including international and unknown-race students.
Source: University of California, Undergraduate Admissions Summary.

First-generation share of UC freshman admits

Percent of admitted first-year students who are first-generation, by campus, fall 2017-2025



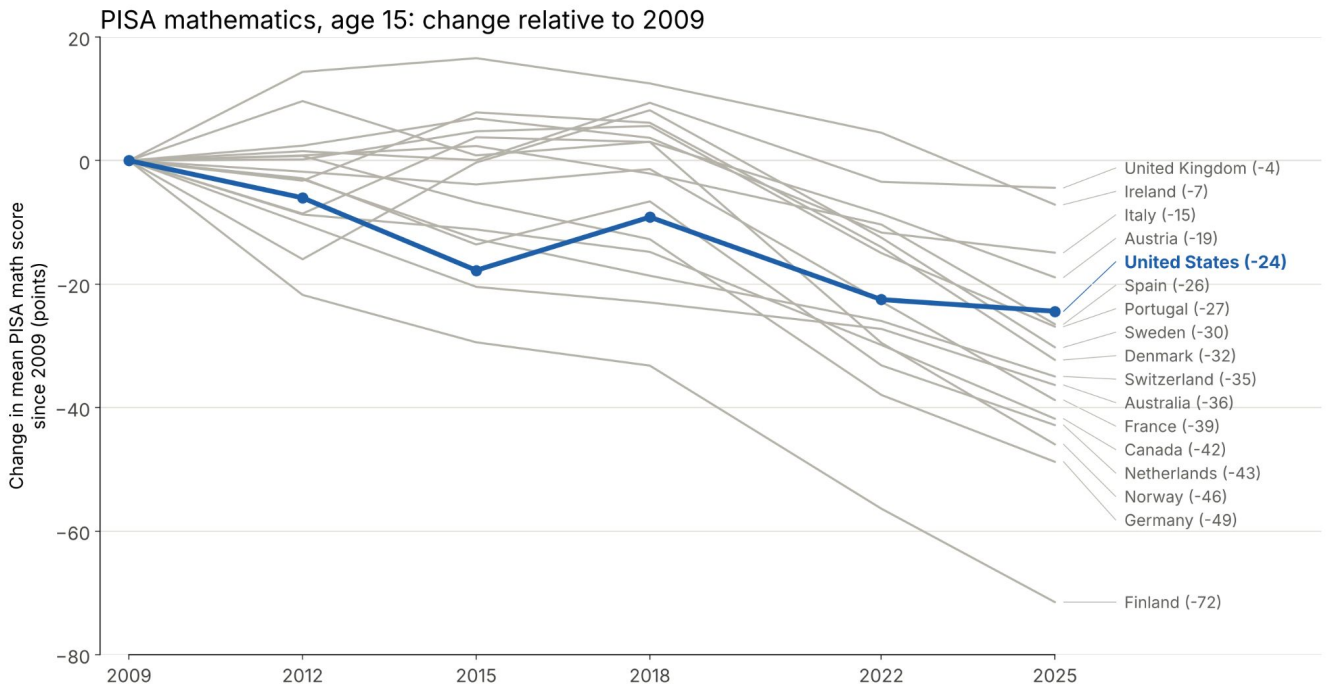
Excludes Merced and Riverside. Admits whose first-generation status is unknown (4-6%) are counted in the denominator.
Source: University of California, Freshman Fall Admissions Summary.
Denominator is all admits, from the first-generation breakdown. Merced opened in 2005.

Declines in UC student preparedness can't be attributed to the SAT change



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Declines in student achievement are broad-based



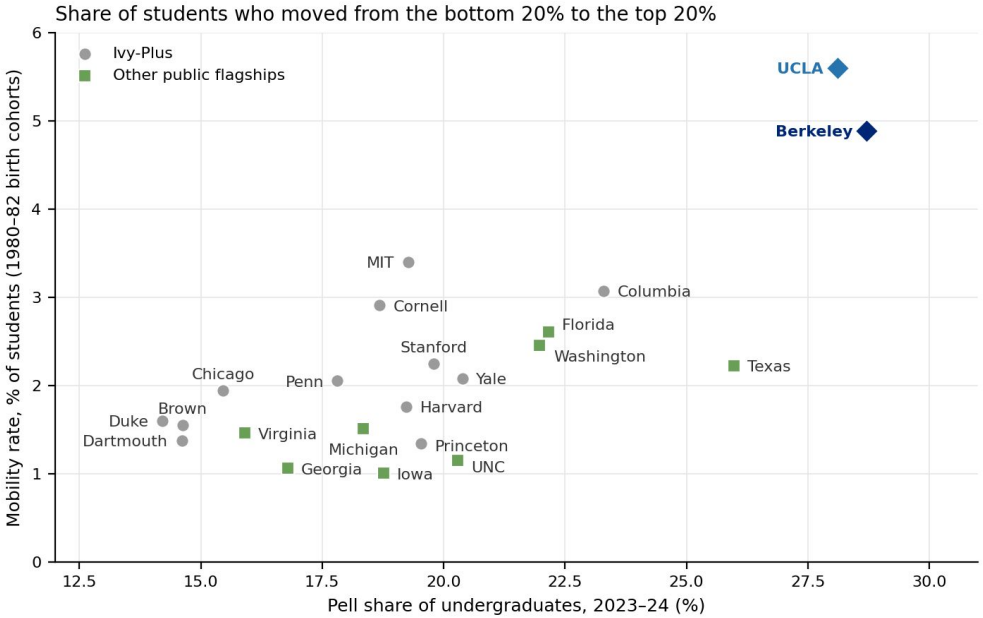
Labels show 2025 change vs. 2009.
Sources: OECD PISA International Data Explorer (2009–2022); PISA 2025 Results, Vol. I, Table I.1 (2025, rounded to whole points).

UC has a different mission from the Ivy League



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UC is a unique engine for social mobility



Mobility rate = share of a college's students whose parents were in the bottom income quintile and who reached the top quintile of individual earnings at ~age 32–34. Sources: Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner & Yagan, Mobility Report Cards (mrc_table2); IPEDS SFA 2023–24 via College Navigator (Pell recipients / degree- or certificate-seeking undergraduates, computed from counts). Washington combines the Seattle, Bothell, and Tacoma campuses, which share one record in the mobility data.

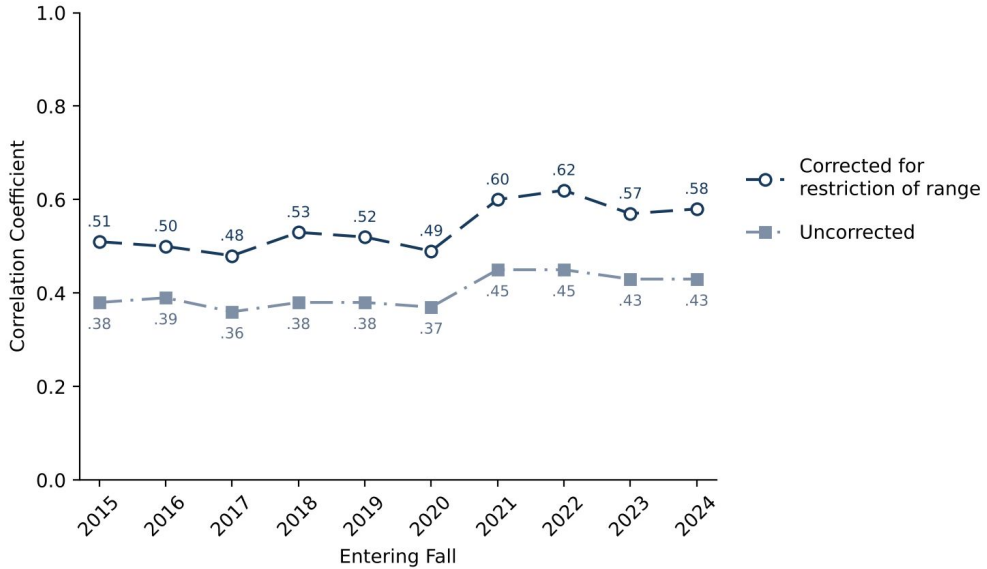
We provide social mobility by admitting students that other highly selective universities don't.

Additional points

1. High school GPAs still carry information, despite grade inflation.
2. Other tests (e.g., SBAC) are as useful as the SAT for predicting college performance but don't have as large socioeconomic gaps as SATs.
3. Ivy League schools seem happy to tilt admissions toward the privileged - they shouldn't be a model for UC.
4. The SAT identifies some "diamonds in the rough," but excludes many more disadvantaged students who would succeed if admitted.
5. Compared with test-required, test-optional admissions increase admissions of disadvantaged students - even at Dartmouth.
6. UC has never "compensated" for socioeconomic gaps in SATs.

High school GPAs still carry information, despite grade inflation

Correlation between weighted high school GPA and first-year GPA, UC



Note: High school GPA is the weighted high school GPA. 2017 uses the revised-SAT sample.

Source: Unpublished working paper by Kurlaender, Dykeman, and Jackson, 2026.

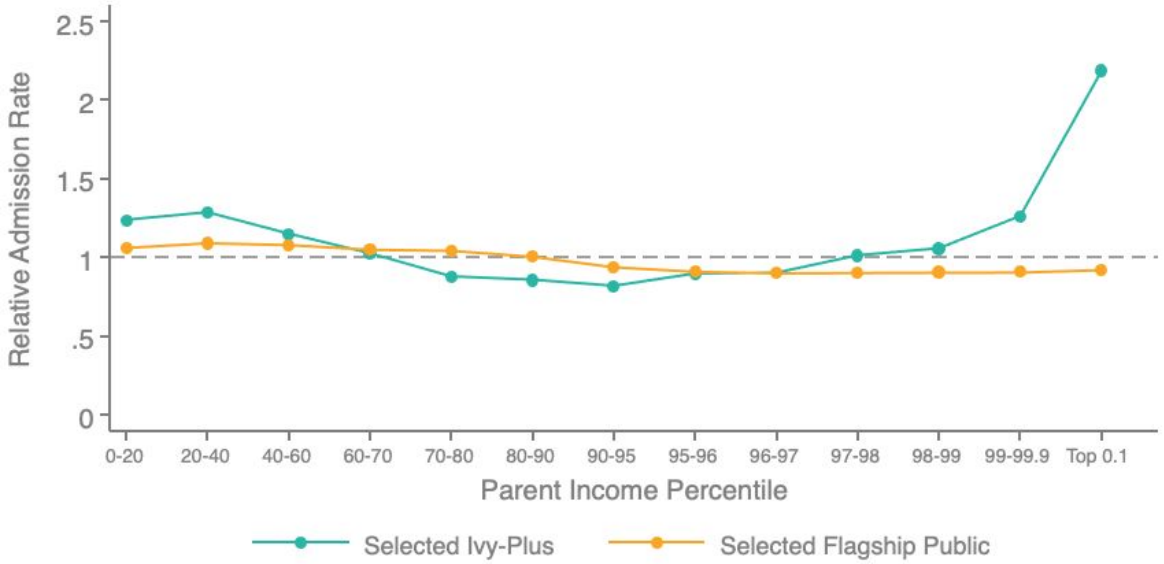
The SES problem isn’t testing - it is the SAT

- The Smarter Balanced test taken by all 11th graders shows smaller socioeconomic gaps than the SAT (STTF report)
- SBAC is approximately as predictive of college performance as the SAT (Kurlaender and Dykeman, 2019)

- Why? Possible factors:
  - SBAC measures whether you learned what high schools tried to teach you; SAT’s origin is as an IQ test.
  - SAT scores are distorted by coaching/tutoring; SBAC isn’t.
  - Stereotype threat.

Ivy League schools seem happy to be inequitable

Admissions rate by parental income, holding SAT/ACT scores constant



Ivy admissions strongly favor the 1%. Public flagship universities do not.

Source: Chetty, Deming & Friedman, "Diversifying Society's Leaders? The Determinants and Causal Effects of Admission to Highly Selective Private Colleges," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2026.

“Diamonds in the rough”

The SAT may identify disadvantaged students who score exceptionally but otherwise don’t have strong applications - so-called diamonds in the rough.

But there are also disadvantaged students whose applications are strong but for a low SAT.

- These students would do better in college - SAT is less predictive than HSGPA within demographic group.
- There are many more of them.

A no-SAT policy admits more of the second group and fewer of the first.

The Dartmouth study

Test optional at Dartmouth:

a. Some students who wouldn't have been admitted with SATs were admitted.

b. Some students who would have been admitted with SATs mistakenly decided not to submit them and were rejected.

c. Many more students applied.

The Dartmouth study counts only these.

If you count all three, test-optional most likely increased the number of disadvantaged students who were admitted.

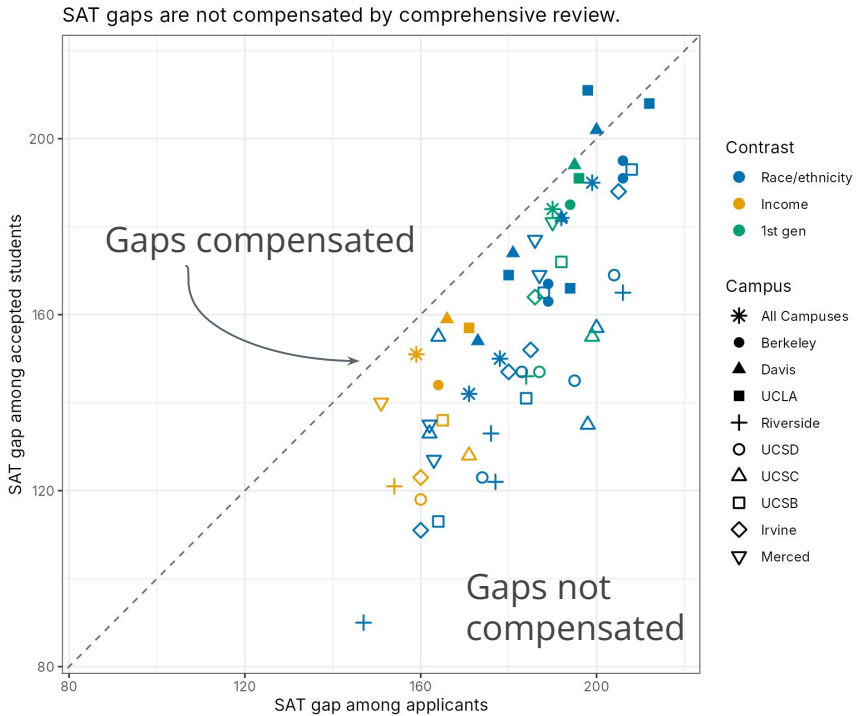
Source: My analysis of data in Sacerdote, Bruce, Douglas O. Staiger, and Michele Tine. 2026. "How Test-Optional Policies in College Admissions Disproportionately Harm High-Achieving Applicants from Disadvantaged Backgrounds." *American Economic Review: Insights* 8 (3): 393–408.

SAT gaps produce UC admissions gaps

The STTF report claimed that “comprehensive review effectively renorms scores” to compare within socioeconomic groups but not across.

Its evidence was that SAT gaps were as large among admitted students as among applicants.

Its own tables showed this isn’t true.



Source: University of California. (2020a, January). Report *of the UC Academic Council standardized testing task force*.