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Removing the 'Scarlet Letter'

The College Board will no longer flag the SAT-score reports of students granted extra time because of disabilities

By ERIC HOOVER

In an era of high-stakes college admissions, even an attempt to level the playing field can cause a tremor of anxiety.

Last week, advocates for the disabled applauded when the College Board announced that it would no longer flag the scores of disabled students who are granted extra time to take its standardized tests. But some university admissions officers and high-school guidance counselors bit their nails, too, worried that the change would prompt more students, including those who are able, to falsely claim disabilities to gain a competitive edge.

"The College Board did the right thing, but that doesn't mean the story ends there," says William R. Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University. "A lot of people in the admissions business are concerned about how to make certain that people with disabilities are not further compromised, as they will be if people who don't have disabilities ... cheat to get extra time they don't need."

Roughly 2 percent of the two million high-school students who take the SAT each year are granted special accommodations because of physical disabilities or documented learning disabilities, including dyslexia or attention-deficit problems. The College Board marks reports of those scores with the words "nonstandard administration," which essentially tells admissions officials that the applicant had more time to take the exam than did others. Typically, those students get four and a half hours to take the three-hour SAT.

Beginning in October 2003, however, the College Board will stop flagging its tests. Critics of the policy, who have charged that the practice unfairly identifies disabled people and devalues their scores, say the move will help destigmatize students with special needs.

"The flag has been a scarlet letter," says Sid Wolinsky, director of litigation for Disability Rights Advocates, a nonprofit group in Oakland, Calif., which represented a disabled

man and two disability organizations in the case that prompted the College Board's policy change. "The practice is stigmatizing in that it brings into play all of these biases and identifies someone who doesn't want to be identified as disabled."

Science and Ethics

In 1999, Mark Breimhorst -- a California man who has no hands and was granted additional time on the Graduate Management Admission Test -- brought a federal lawsuit against the Educational Testing Service, which owns the GMAT. Mr. Breimhorst claimed that the flag on his score report was a violation of federal disability laws and that the practice was discriminatory because it suggested that his score was inflated.

As a result of that lawsuit, the Educational Testing Service announced last year that it would stop flagging scores on many of its exams, including the GMAT and the Graduate Record Examinations. The shift did not affect the SAT, which the ETS administers but the College Board owns.

That decision prompted the College Board and the parties in the lawsuit to select a panel of experts in disability matters, university admissions, and standardized testing to recommend whether flagging should continue on the SAT and other College Board tests.

The panel referred to the principles established in "Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing," developed by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education, which state: "Until tests have been validated for people who have specific handicapping conditions, test publishers should issue cautionary statements in manuals and elsewhere regarding confidence in interpretations based on such test scores."

Nonetheless, the panel concluded, by a 4-to-2 vote, that the College Board should drop the practice based on "scientific and ethical factors."

In its majority report, "Flagging Test Scores of Individuals With Disabilities Who Are Granted the Accommodation of Extended Time," the panel wrote that flagging "amplifies stereotypes, discourages students from applying for needed accommodations, and represents a profound and artificial barrier preventing students with disabilities, most often those with learning disabilities, from equal access to colleges and future careers."

The panel also found that the test scores of students who had extra time on the SAT were not significantly less predictive of a student's performance in college than the scores of students who took the SAT in the normal time.

That colleges will no longer be able to differentiate between students who took the test under normal conditions and those who did not could prompt a greater number of college applicants to seek special accommodations, however.

"I'm not sure the College Board's decision really does level the playing field," says

Robert J. Massa, vice president for enrollment, student life, and college relations at Dickinson College, in Pennsylvania. "Removing the stigma won't open up the floodgates, but will serve very well a category of student on the margin of qualifying for extended time who previously hasn't taken advantage of this option. That student typically would come from a fairly wealthy background."

Rich Get Richer?

In 2000, the *Los Angeles Times* found a high concentration of learning disabled accommodations in wealthy neighborhoods, particularly among preparatory-school students.

The article described parents who were savvy enough to find psychologists who would diagnose their children's slight problems as full-fledged learning disabilities. Some admissions officials and high-school guidance counselors speculate that many well-to-do students receive phony diagnoses to try to better their SAT scores.

Yet Paul G. Jamelske, an assistant principal at Washington-Lee High School, in Arlington, Va., who praises the College Board's decision, says it is difficult to fake a disability. Students who seek special accommodations at his school are evaluated by a panel that includes administrators, a psychologist, and a special-education expert, among others.

Moreover, the College Board requires verification from high schools when students request special accommodations on any of its standardized tests.

Mr. Jamelske predicted, however, that more parents might now seek to determine whether their children have learning disabilities.

"We have routine requests from parents who would like to have their children evaluated, and some are so bold as to say that they are trying to get an accommodation so that their children can get a higher SAT score," Mr. Jamelske says.

"I don't think this change will cause more people to abuse the system, but I do think it might cause a few more people to attempt to do so."

Experts say spotting fake diagnoses can be difficult for high-school officials, though. Jane McClure, a San Francisco-based educational psychologist who has done consulting work for the College Board, says, "In reviewing documentation of learning disabilities, I've been surprised to see what conclusions some psychologists will make from a set of test results."

High-school officials might find it hard to quibble with parents who present them with a doctor's diagnosis of their son's or daughter's learning disability. And while some schools have review procedures in place, others do not.

"Some guidance counselors don't even know about learning disabilities or how to ask for accommodations," Ms. McClure says.

In its report, the panel argued that the notion that middle-class white students overuse accommodations is largely a "myth": "While it is true that more white students compared to minority students request accommodations ... this most likely represents an underrepresentation of minority students requesting accommodations."

The panel urged the College Board to better inform students -- particularly minority and poor students -- of their rights under the Americans With Disabilities Act to receive testing accommodations.

The College Board itself issued a cautious statement from Gaston Caperton, its president: "While agreeing that the rights of disabled persons should prevail over other considerations, we also recognize the ongoing concerns ... that the College Board must uphold a rigorous review process to ensure that extended test-taking time is not granted to students who do not require this accommodation."

Meanwhile, ACT Inc., which owns and administers the ACT exam, says the company will re-evaluate its policy on flagging in light of the College Board's decision, according to Ken Gullette, a spokesman. ACT marks the score reports of students who take additional time with the word "special."

About 20,000 students who took the ACT last year were granted accommodations, out of the roughly one million graduating seniors who took the exam.

For the Good of the Student

Even as some admissions officials and guidance counselors fret about potential abuses of the system, others play down those concerns.

"This is just part of the mania over testing," says Roberto Noya, dean of admissions at Drew University. "It has not been my experience that a flag on a student's test was held against them. This isn't going to make a big difference in terms of who's getting into what college."

Mr. Noya and others say that the most profound difference may be that students with disabilities -- and their parents -- will no longer have to deal with the perception that they are being singled out on College Board tests.

Monique Chapman, whose son, Juleus, has dyslexia, says flagging is "demeaning and demoralizing" and hopes the decision to end flagging on the SAT will prompt administrators of other tests to end the practice. Juleus, who is 15, is a plaintiff in a lawsuit brought by Disability Rights Advocates against California's Department of Education, alleging that the state's high-school exit exams do not provide adequate accommodations for learning-disabled students.

Ms. Chapman notes that her son's grades are not flagged at the California high school he attends, even though he is allowed to take extra time on class tests, compose essay exams on computers, and use a tape recorder for lectures. She says the same should be true for all tests.

"Where there is that asterisk next to your name, you're going to worry what people might think when they see it," Ms. Chapman says. "This issue is about the opportunity to be a contributor to society as opposed to a statistic."

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