



Standardized test scores don't determine success

Independent schools should stop requiring applicants to take them

By Ryan Mulhern and Alixe Callen

Imagine if you will ... an honor-roll student with a challenging course load. A star soccer player. The school president. A 2020 graduate of St. George's School. A future Williams College scholar-athlete.

Meet Tate Michelson. A Newport, Rhode Island, native, Tate applied for admission to St. George's in 2016. His transcript, application, and interview showcased his potential to shine as a four-year student-athlete and community leader. Here was a student who took advantage of every academic opportunity, was curious and insightful in class, and was kind and considerate to his peers. In short, he exhibited many attributes independent schools say they desire in their students. His standardized test scores, however, failed to appropriately represent his academic potential. He always knew he would apply to St. George's, but Tate and his parents feared that his test scores could hurt his chances for admission.

For decades, St. George's, like most independent schools in the country, has used results from the Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT) – in conjunction with students' grades, teacher recommendations, extra-curricular achievements, and character – to determine which students will be offered admission. In such an environment, students like Tate, talented and hard-working kids whose test scores don't match their other attributes, can be overlooked. Seeing the success of students like Tate, we became concerned by this over-reliance on a single high-stakes test score. Could a three-hour test truly predict a student's high school performance? We decided to research whether success on this metric, which measures reading, verbal, and mathematical abilities under strict time constraints, correlated with success in our school community.

Over the past two years we conducted a study examining how students with SSAT scores outside of our usual range fared at St. George's. Despite a record number of applicants, we combed our applicant pool to identify a group of skilled and accomplished students who would otherwise be denied acceptance based on their test results. We admitted those students and tracked their performance over a two year period. The results were beyond conclusive. 98 percent of the students in the study experienced success at St. George's, earning solid grades and effort marks in the classroom, while also contributing to the life of the school. These encouraging outcomes, paired with the school's emphasis on inclusivity, recently led our Board of Trustees to vote to end the standardized test requirement for admission.

In their conversations ahead of this vote, our Board of Trustees concluded that evaluating students based on a single number undermines the school's mission. St. George's values inclusivity, diversity, and access to education for high-achieving, hard-working students globally. Standardized testing has presented barriers to secondary school and college admission since its establishment. Indeed there is a strong link between a student's performance on the SSAT and various measures of socioeconomic status, including parents' level of education, quality of available schooling, and access to enrichment activities. Consideration of the entire student, their capabilities, and their potential to impact our community is paramount to achieve diversity in intellectual thought, talent, and experience on our small campus.

We believe students should have the power to present themselves in a way that accurately represents their ability and potential. As of late 2019, over one thousand colleges and universities, including half of the nation's most selective liberal arts colleges, have dropped their standardized test requirement. In recent weeks, as the global pandemic has introduced further concerns about the validity of standardized testing, even more institutions have made the decision to move to a test optional approach.

St. George's will continue to accept SSAT test scores from those applicants that choose to share them, but they will not be required for admission. We respect that other independent schools may not follow in our footsteps. Still, we remain confident that this change will strengthen our school community by giving even more bright, motivated and talented students like Tate the chance to benefit from the challenges and opportunities that a St. George's education provides.

Over the course of the past few months, Tate, as student body president, has worked closely with the administration to sustain our sense of spirit and community throughout the coronavirus crisis. His strong leadership skills, combined with his dynamic personality have reverberated throughout our community, helping to hold us together while the virus keeps us physically apart.

Thank goodness we looked beyond that test score.

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