

Higher SAT, ACT scores pay off with bigger college scholarships for Oregon grads



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Southridge High student Augusta Herman knew just what she wanted in a college: small, urban, ideally Jesuit, with a top-notch pre-med program.

She found many that met her criteria, including Marquette University, Notre Dame, **Creighton University** and Seattle University.

There was just one problem: Her family's income was too high to qualify her for financial aid -- but not high enough that her parents would pay the \$50,000 yearly cost of attending one of those schools.

Always a highly motivated student, Herman decided to take advantage of a proven but little-known, phenomenon: Many selective colleges draw a direct line between a student's SAT or ACT score and the size of the merit scholarship they offer.

Students who score in the top 10 percent of test-takers -- about 2000 out of 2400 on the SAT or a 28 out of 36 on the ACT -- can count on being offered merit scholarships as large as \$20,000 a year at many great colleges.

Some universities spell that out in black and white. **Seattle Pacific University's website shows** that a student with a 3.75 grade-point average and a combined score of 1110 on the SAT math and reading sections qualifies for a \$10,000-a-year scholarship. But if that student were able to score 100 points higher, the scholarship would increase to \$12,000, netting the student an additional \$8,000 over four years of college.

Other universities say they consider a student holistically and that a test score doesn't hold specific weight.

But **a requirement that took effect in October 2011 -- that every university put a "net cost calculator" on its website** to let students see how much they would be expected to pay out of pocket to go there -- shows that's often not the case. Students who enter their full profile then change nothing but their SAT or ACT score can watch the scholarship offers grow as the score rises.

Articles and **tip sheets that advise students and parents how to afford college** almost never mention that a 100- or 200-point increase in SAT scores, or a similar gain on the ACT, can translate to thousands of dollars in merit aid, however. Nor do school counselors typically talk it up.

Brian Bills, owner of Lake Oswego-based **AcerLogic Educational Services**, which prepares students for the SAT and other standardized tests, is perplexed by that. For years, he's seen students among those he has shepherded through the college admission process get dramatically higher scholarship offers after submitting a higher SAT or ACT score.

The college cost calculators make it starkly clear, he said.

He wonders: Given that scoring 100 points higher can yield \$8,000 more in scholarships, and an even bigger gain can lead to a \$100,000 four-year scholarship, why don't more students pour time and money into bettering their score?

His own one-on-one coaching, which he guarantees will lead to a 250-point gain, costs plenty: normally \$2,650. But Portland has an array of other options. **Portland's nonprofit Saturday Academy offers a five-week, 15-hour group SAT prep course** packed with practical tips for \$359 and math- or writing-specific SAT courses for less than \$200. While Saturday Academy does not guarantee improvement, students who've taken the full course have averaged a 150-point gain on the reading and math sections combined, says Gail Pyle, the academy's director of classes.

A ticket to Creighton

Augusta Herman scored 1750 on her first attempt at the SAT, when she was a junior with a 3.7 GPA. She turned to Bills for help after a college consultant explained the score-to-scholarship connection.

She told Bills she wanted to score 2100, a huge and statistically improbable gain.

But she is a highly motivated hard worker, she and her parents say. For six weeks, Bills coached her twice a week and gave her materials to work on on her own. Daily, she spent hours mastering the 25 weekly vocabulary words, going over math problems from easy classes she had taken early in high school and which comprise the bulk of the SAT math section, and practicing reading comprehension strategies.

Six weeks after her first SAT test, she took another -- and scored that 2100.

When admission letters rolled in senior year, most of her nine top schools admitted her; the rest put her on a waiting list. The scholarship offers were even better: Each school awarded her its largest available merit award, including **Case Western Reserve University's** offer of \$25,000 a year, says her mother, Barbara Ann Herman.

Augusta Herman chose Creighton, in Omaha, Neb., on the strength of its pre-med program, its Jesuit sense of mission and its medical school. The \$15,000 yearly merit scholarship Creighton gave her, coupled with the college's relatively low total costs of \$45,000 a year, made that choice possible.

"If (the scholarship) hadn't been that much, she wouldn't be going," Barbara Ann Herman says, noting the family has two younger daughters whose college costs they will also have to pay.

Augusta Herman is now a sophomore and feels incredibly lucky. "Creighton professors want to me to succeed and are doing everything in their power to help me succeed," she said as she prepared for an organic chemistry final last week. "The academics are extremely challenging here, but the environment is really supportive."

"A slippery slope"

A quarter century ago, private colleges awarded little or no merit aid, says **Jim Sumner, vice president for enrollment at Willamette University** who has overseen admissions at Willamette, **Grinnell College** and Lewis & Clark College during a career spanning almost 40 years. Back then, selective colleges awarded financial aid to those in need and expected wealthier families to pay full freight.

But after Baby Boomers got through college and fewer students were graduating from the nation's high schools, colleges began to compete harder for the best students, Sumner said -- and little competes like money.

Many private universities found that merit scholarships helped them enroll better students with higher grades and higher test scores, he said. More and larger scholarships magnified the effect. "It's a slippery slope most private colleges went down," Sumner says.

Now only universities in the top 2 percent of selectivity -- Ivy League schools, [Reed College](#) and Stanford University, among others -- do not give merit aid.

At most private universities, nearly every student gets a merit scholarship, a financial aid package or both. The question is not whether a student will get aid, but how much.

For [Wade Hilts](#), who graduated from Portland's Franklin High in 2011, the answer was \$112,000. [Tulane University](#) awarded him a \$28,000 yearly merit scholarship. He had great grades, a seriousness about engineering, and music skills good enough that he's played the main stage at the Waterfront Blues Festival twice. But what clinched the offer, according to his mom, artist Molly Cliff Hilts, was his high SAT score.

Wade Hilts scored just below 2000 on his first attempt. A college cost consultant advised his parents to hire Bills to coach him. He notched a 2170 on his retake.

Why SATs matter

An SAT score alone won't get a student into college and won't guarantee a big scholarship, says consultant [Mike Brady, who has advised 1,800 Portland-area students how to get into and pay for a good college](#). Now retired, he offers advice for free at [collegeboundfunding.com](#). He also offers free coaching to low-income students and has room to help 15 more this year.

Students must have good grades plus other "hooks" such as a track record of leadership, service or talent in sports or music, Brady says.

But colleges genuinely believe that a student with a higher SAT score will be a stronger student -- more likely to graduate in four years, more likely to earn top grades, more likely to succeed after college, Sumner and Brady say. Admitting students with high scores also helps their university rank higher and look more selective, which in turn draws more top students, they say.

So colleges will continue to offer bigger scholarships for higher SAT scores, Brady says. "Bottom line, colleges buy who they want."

-- [Betsy Hammond](#)

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