

# Woolf College Consulting



## **MARCH MADNESS (IT'S NOT ABOUT BASKETBALL)**

*How more and more colleges are easing the anxiety over college admissions testing*

By Betsy F. Woolf

“Sweet 16.” “Elite 8.” “Final Four.” If you’re a hoops fan, these words will ring loudly this month, as the madness that is college basketball rises to a frenzy in the annual sports rite known as the NCAA Division I Men’s Basketball Championship Tournament. This article isn’t about *that* March Madness. It’s about the March Madness that takes place for high school juniors on one special March day. That day is SAT Saturday, traditionally the first foray into taking the SAT for many students. For the basketball fan, *the tournament*, as it is known, comes once a year. For high school juniors and seniors, the SATs and their rivals, the ACTs (whose madness gets delayed until April), keep coming back again and again, seven times each year for the SATs and five or six times for the ACTs.

Although decreasing in importance, standardized tests are still relied on by a majority of colleges and universities in the U.S. as a factor to be considered in admissions. But a number of schools are bucking that trend, making the submission of scores optional. About 700 institutions of higher education are now test optional, a deceptive number that includes a fair number of art schools and technical schools. It does, however, include some fine competitive colleges and universities, among them Dickinson, Hamilton, Bates, Bowdoin,

Middlebury, Muhlenberg, Franklin & Marshall, Union, and Bard Colleges, as well as Lawrence and Drew Universities.

Recently, I attended a conference for college counselors at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA., where I sat down with Associate Dean of Admissions Angela Barone to talk about Dickinson's test-optional policy. Dickinson's "take" on admissions testing is representative of much of the thought on this topic within higher education today.

*Betsy:* Why does Dickinson give students the option of applying to the college without submitting SAT scores?

*Angela:* We are committed to prioritizing academic performance over scores. We found that we were always trying to fight against the perception that somewhere behind the scenes, the SATs were really the bars that determined admission.

*Betsy:* Did you feel as though Dickinson was missing out on some good applicants by relying on standardized tests?

*Angela:* Yes. You could see it in prospective students' faces. We realized that there were a lot of good applicants who were discouraged from applying to Dickinson because they felt their SAT scores were too low. The one college essay that has stayed with me is the one in which a female student wrote: "I will always remember the day I received my SAT scores and realized I was not as smart as I thought I was." That's so sad. We don't want students to see themselves as failures because of their test scores.

*Betsy:* Do most students submit scores?

*Angela:* They do by far. Every year, there are candidates whom I suspect don't know they can apply without submitting test scores. Some candidates have already had the testing agencies send their scores and don't realize that we won't look at those scores if they tell us in their applications that they don't want their scores to be considered.

*Betsy:* Why don't more schools go test optional?

*Angela:* If you believe that a score is a standard measure of students, an admission committee has an easy way to compare candidates. It can default to a preconceived notion of what a particular score means. We think it's to a student's advantage to make admissions representatives' jobs harder [by not considering scores] because it forces them to look more closely at each candidate in order to get a clearer picture of what each student can do. We really have to understand the context well – the profile of the particular high school, the rigor of its curriculum, what classes a candidate has taken in comparison with the rest of the student body.

*Betsy:* Is there a down side to not submitting scores?

*Angela:* If you're not submitting scores, you have to be prepared for the full weight of the admission committee's review of your ability to be based on your academic record, essays, recommendations and extracurricular activities. Not submitting scores works for a student whose academics are a real reflection of what he or she can do but whose scores are not.