

College Board widens the net for scholarships

Scholarships

Lack of minimum GPA or SAT score meant to draw lower-income students

Aamer Madhani | USA TODAY

The College Board, the nonprofit group that administers the SAT and Advanced Placement tests, launched a \$25 million scholarship program intended to help students at the bottom of the class as much it does the valedictorians. College Board President David Coleman told USA TODAY the College Board Opportunity Scholarship has no minimum grade-point average or SAT score requirement.

Instead, students become eligible for scholarships by working their way through a checklist of essential steps in the college application process – such as building a list of schools they’re interested in attending, practicing for the SAT, improving their scores and filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

The program is intended to nudge more students, particularly low-income youth who might fear that college is financially out of reach, to apply for college. Half the scholarships will be set aside for students whose families earn less than \$60,000 annually.

All U.S. high school students – including undocumented immigrants – are eligible for the scholarships.

“We’re in a very, very dangerous situation in this country, where many students don’t see college as part of their future,” Coleman said in an exclusive interview with USA TODAY. “A college education is so important to future success – future economic success.”

Forty-nine percent of Americans surveyed last year said they believed earning a four-year degree would lead to a good job and higher lifetime earnings, according to a Wall Street Journal/ NBC News poll. Forty-seven percent said they didn’t.

Thirty-seven percent of respondents ages 18 to 34 said a four-year degree was worth the cost. Fifty-seven

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percent disagreed.

for keeping many out of the nation’s elite universities.

Dozens of small liberal arts colleges – and a few first-tier research universities – made submitting standardized testing scores optional.

In June, the University of Chicago, which came in third in U.S. News & World Report’s most recent national

Millennials, who flooded university campuses over the past decade or two, are aging out of their college years.

U.S. birthrates dipped after the Great Recession of a decade ago. By 2026, when the “front edge” of the recession birth dearth is ready to head to campus, the number of college-age students is projected to drop almost 15 percent in five years, according to economist Nathan Grawe.

For each of the next five years, the College Board said, it will award 600 scholarships of \$500 to students for building a college list, 1,500 scholarships worth \$1,000 for practicing for the SAT, 150 scholarships worth \$2,000 for improving SAT scores, 400 scholarships worth \$500 for strengthening college lists, 800 scholarships worth \$1,000 for completing the FAFSA and 500 scholarships worth \$1,000 for applying for college.

Students will become eligible for the scholarships through monthly drawings as they work their way through the checklist.

The College Board said it will award at least 25 scholarships worth \$40,000 to students who complete all six steps on the checklist.

A tiny fraction of high school students considering college will win one of the nearly 20,000 scholarships the College Board plans to award.

Nicole Hurd, CEO of College Advising Corps, said the program’s greatest value might be in pushing students and their families to take steps – such as filling out FAFSA – that could make the path to college more affordable.

The high school class of 2017 left as much as \$2.3 billion in federal grant money for college on the table by not completing or submitting the FAFSA, according to the financial website NerdWallet.

“The beauty of what the College Board is actually doing is incentivizing families to make decisions that are in their financial benefit,” Hurd said.

Barbara Gill, associate vice president for enrollment management at the University of Maryland, said many low-income students, even the highest achievers, are so daunted by the sticker price of a four-year institution that they don’t even apply.

Other students enroll in cheaper, less selective colleges.

university rankings, announced it was making the standardized tests optional for applicants. It became the first elite American university to diminish the importance of the SAT, as well as the competing ACT, in its admission process.

Last year, 70 percent of Asian testtakers and 59 percent of whites achieved the reading and writing and mathematics benchmarks on the SAT – the level the College Board said indicates a student is likely to have success in certain college courses. Twenty percent of black test takers, 31 percent of Latinos and 27 percent of Native Americans reached the benchmarks.

Coleman pushed back against the notion that the scholarship program was intended to burnish the College Board’s brand when it is taking lumps in the academic world.

“More students are taking these exams than ever before,” he said. “But I really care about that much, much less than the bigger problem we face, which is that there are so many kids that aren’t engaged. The sad truth about high school is that too many kids pull themselves out of the running and don’t think they’ll ever make it to college.”

Coleman said the College Board spent years developing the scholarship program.

Priscilla Rodriguez, the organization’s executive director for scholarship strategy, said it held focus groups with students in New York City public schools and in Oakland, California, and surveyed thousands of students, parents and college counselors around the country.

College Board officials thought that students’ and parents’ primary focus would be on the scholarship money.

Instead, they said, many students surveyed – particularly seniors in the midst of the college applications – were as interested in how the program could be used to navigate the more opaque corners of the application process.

“There was some tough emotional reflection from students saying, ‘I wish I had known,’ ” Rodriguez said. “It really reaffirmed that there are so many students that don’t have a plan.”

The College Board “is incentivizing families to make decisions that are in their financial benefit.”

“Those students would benefit from setting their sights higher,” Gill said. “That’s why this scholarship program is attractive.” **Nicole Hurd**, CEO of College Advising Corps

There’s been criticism that standardized tests are biased against blacks, Latinos and Native Americans and are partly to blame