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**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE:  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE POTENTIAL FOR SAT-OPTIONAL ADMISSIONS**

by

Albert L. Betts, Jr.

A Dissertation

Submitted to the

Department of Educational Leadership

College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of

Doctor of Education

At

Rowan University

August 3, 2011

Dissertation Chair: Steven Chin, Ph.D., P.E.

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## **Dedication**

To my mother, Grace Louise Troup Betts, who passed away midway through this project in December of 2010 after a remarkable decade-plus battle with cancer. I'm sure she is looking down quite amazed that a son of parents with junior high school educations could have Dr. before his name. If I can treat all the people I encounter in this world half as well as she always did, my life will be an unqualified success.

## Abstract

Albert L. Betts, Jr.  
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE:  
AN EXAMINATION OF THE POTENTIAL FOR SAT-OPTIONAL ADMISSIONS  
2010/2011  
Steven Chin, Ph.D., P.E.  
Educational Leadership

The use of SAT scores in the college admissions process has been increasingly criticized in recent years for a variety of reasons. There are those who continue to support the use of the SAT in the college admissions process, those who oppose its use, and those who believe the best option is to make the submission of standardized tests scores optional. Currently, all applicants for undergraduate admission to Rowan University with less than 24 college credits earned must submit standardized test scores along with their high school and college transcripts when applying for admission to the university. The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to determine whether SAT scores should continue to be a required component of the freshman admission decision-making process at Rowan or if a change to an SAT-optional admissions policy should be considered by the university. Data was collected using qualitative interviews, a focus group, an online survey, and quantitative statistical analyses. A SWOT analysis of the findings indicated support for a change to SAT-optional admissions at Rowan from university admissions officers, current students, faculty members, academic advisors, and the high school guidance counselors of the state of New Jersey. The quantitative analyses showed that high school GPA is a much stronger predictor of freshman academic success at Rowan than SAT scores. After reviewing the findings, the author recommends that Rowan University consider a potential change to SAT-optional admissions.

*Keywords:* SAT-optional, mixed methodology, SWOT analysis, educational leadership

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## **Chapter I: Problem Statement**

### **Introduction: The Perceived Importance of the SAT**

Each year across America, almost one and a half million high school students take the SAT 1 college entrance examination. The SAT 1 (SAT) differs from achievement tests, like the SAT II subject tests, in that it does not measure students' mastery of specific college-preparatory subject areas, but instead is designed to measure verbal and mathematical aptitudes for future learning that are not dependent on particular high school courses or curricula (Geiser and Studley, 2002). It is thus argued that the test corrects for the effects of vast differences in the quality of our secondary schools, along with the inconsistencies created by grade inflation (Atkinson, 2001). With limited spaces available at many institutions and increasing demands for accountability, it is imperative that admissions officers select students who are likely to succeed. Colleges and universities across the country employ a myriad of criteria when selecting students for admission to their institutions. High school courses, grade point averages, class ranks, essays, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities, and many other factors are taken into consideration (Tam and Sukhatme, 2004). However, the factors with the most impact are the students' standardized test scores. At least two-thirds of colleges and universities use the SAT as a main factor in their admissions decisions (Hunter and Samter, 2000). Many students and their parents look at the day they receive their SAT scores as one of the most crucial moments in their educational lives (Amberg, 2001). Rightly or wrongly, the academic futures of many young people hinge on how well they score on this one admissions test.

In addition to the use of SAT scores as one of the primary determinants of whether individual students are selected for admission to many colleges and universities, the average or

median SAT score of accepted or enrolled freshmen at institutions has become the primary factor by which many judge the “quality” of undergraduate colleges and universities. The reasoning behind this is that interaction with fellow students is an important component of higher education and the better one’s fellow students are, at least as measured by the SAT, the better the quality of one’s academic experience (Pascarella, et al., 2006). Even though it is a consumer magazine created without the involvement of any academic institution, the U.S. News & World Report “America’s Best Colleges” edition carries enormous weight among both the public and colleges and universities themselves (Bial and Rodriguez, 2007). Although U.S. News & World Report claims its rating process uses 16 equally-weighted measures of academic quality, a principal component analysis showed that the component that most determined a place in these coveted rankings was the mean SAT of incoming freshmen (Pascarella, et al, 2006). The quality of high schools is also often measured by its students’ mean SAT scores and even the worth of real estate in many neighborhoods across the country is influenced by the average SAT scores of its residents (Syverson, 2007).

The wide use of the SAT has been based primarily on the belief that students should be judged for admission into institutions of higher education based on their ability to learn, more so than what they have learned (Geiser, 2008). There are those who oppose the use of the SAT in the college admissions process (Atkinson, 2001), those who support the use of standardized tests (Geiser, 2008), and those who believe the best option is to make the submission of standardized tests score optional (Syverson, 2007).

### **Existing Rowan Policy**

Rowan University, located in Glassboro, New Jersey, is a public university with an enrollment slightly over 11,000 students, including approximately 8,700 full-time undergraduate

students. The existing admissions policy at Rowan University requires that all applicants for undergraduate admission with less than 24 college credits earned must submit standardized test scores along with their high school and college transcripts when applying for admission to Rowan. The literature suggests that, based on the many doubts about and criticisms of the use of standardized test scores in college admissions, such an SAT-required policy should at the very least be examined to determine if it still remains relevant and appropriate.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Currently, all applicants for undergraduate admission to Rowan University with less than 24 college credits earned must submit standardized test scores along with their high school and college transcripts when applying for admission to the university. The purpose of this mixed methods research study is to determine whether or not SAT scores should continue to be a required component of the freshman admission decision-making process at Rowan. A second purpose of this study is to assess how addressing the current use of the SAT in the admissions process and any potential changes in that use impact my leadership in the Office of Admissions and across the university.

### **Methodology**

This is a convergent parallel design mixed methods study that gathered data using both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Qualitative research is done in naturalistic settings; utilizes descriptive data, including interview transcripts and fieldnotes and employs inductive data analysis that searches for meaning (Glesne, 2006). Quantitative research is structured and experimental in nature and analyzes the data statistically in order to from generalizations that can be applied to other similar situations (Bogdan and

Biklen, 2007). The qualitative and quantitative data in this study were compared and triangulated in an attempt to best understand and interpret the information collected (Creswell, 2009).

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. Are SAT scores a valid predictor of freshman success at Rowan University?
2. In what ways does the study indicate that the SAT should or should not be a required component of the admissions process for freshman applicants to Rowan University?
3. How will addressing the current use of the SAT in the admissions process and any potential changes in that use impact my leadership in the Office of Admissions, throughout the university, and the development of my overall leadership qualities and abilities in all situations?

As the Director of Admissions at Rowan University, I am the individual whose ultimate responsibility it is to do everything possible to recruit, select for admission, and enroll students who will succeed and persist at the university. Particularly with first-year students coming out of high school, there are a set of admissions criteria the Admissions staff uses to determine what applicants are granted admission to the institution and who are denied entrance. Although there are many factors involved in the evaluation of every individual's application for admission, there are a few key measures that are examined for all applicants. Chief among these are the standardized test scores of the students. Although there is no absolute minimum SAT score required for admission to Rowan, there is, in fact, a rather limited range of SAT scores that the vast majority of freshman applicants must fall into in order to be granted admission. There are many potentially successful students who are denied admission to Rowan based solely on their standardized test scores with the disregard of other strong supporting evidence to the contrary. This study is designed to examine the current SAT-required admissions policy at Rowan



University to determine if it still remains relevant and appropriate to achieving the institution's goal of enrolling the most academically qualified students from its applicant pool. This is an appropriate research topic which could potentially lead to a major change in the manner in which admission decisions are made for students applying to Rowan University, but the process of doing so has an underlying purpose which is to analyze my leadership qualities and assess my ability to lead institutional change.

It is important to note that this study focuses only on the SAT which is, by far, the predominant standardized test submitted by freshman applicants for admission to Rowan. Applicants also have the option of submitting ACT scores and in most ways scores from the two tests are considered interchangeably in the admissions process. However, there are some inherent differences in the two tests (Syverson, 2007). This study addresses the use of the SAT in the admissions process at Rowan University and the findings of this research project cannot always be freely translated to also pertain to the ACT.

To provide a contextual background for this research project, Chapter II contains an extensive review of the literature on the role of the SAT in college admissions.

## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

### Introduction

In an annual rite of passage, almost one and a half million American high school students take the SAT 1 college entrance examination each year. The SAT 1 (SAT) is not designed to measure mastery of specific college-preparatory subject areas in the manner of the SAT II subject tests and other achievement tests. Rather, the SAT was created to measure verbal and mathematical aptitudes for future learning that do not depend on a student's high school curricula (Geiser & Studley, 2002). This leads many to believe that the SAT can correct for the effects of the varying quality of secondary schools in this country and the inconsistencies caused by grade inflation (Atkinson, 2001). College admissions directors and deans are charged with the task of selecting students who are likely to succeed at their institutions. Many different criteria are employed by admissions officers in their student selection processes. These include secondary school courses, ranks in class, grade point averages, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities, essays, ethnicity, and many other factors (Tam & Sukhatme, 2004). Ultimately, the factors with by far the greatest impact are applicants' standardized test scores. Over two-thirds of colleges and universities admit to using the SAT as the primary factor in their admissions decisions (Hunter & Samter, 2000). The fact that the educational futures of so many students can hinge on these scores is the reason students and their parents so often look at the day they receive their SAT score report as one of the most fateful days in their young lives (Amberg, 2001).

Beyond its use for determining whether students are selected for admission, the mean SAT score of freshman students has also become the main criteria by which the supposed quality of undergraduate colleges and universities are judged. This is based on the supposition that a higher average SAT score means a "better" student body and thus, a better quality academic

experience (Pascarella et al., 2006). The U.S. News & World Report “America’s Best Colleges” edition has a huge impact upon both the public and higher education institutions themselves (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007). U.S. News & World Report asserts that its rating process uses 16 equally-weighted measures of academic quality, but a principal component analysis demonstrated that the component with by far the greatest impact in the ratings was the mean SAT of incoming freshmen students (Pascarella et al, 2006). Even though the test was never remotely envisioned for such purposes, such things as the worth of real estate in some areas is influenced by the average SAT scores of the students in its neighborhoods (Syverson, 2007).

Obviously, the SAT is perceived as a very important examination by many people for many different reasons. With all the potential life-changing and image-changing emphasis placed on this single standardized test, several basic questions should be asked. Is the SAT, in fact, a valid predictor of future college academic success? In essence, does it really measure what its designers claim and the public assumes it measures? Secondly, does the SAT produce a fair, unbiased assessment of all students taking the test? And finally, how exactly should the SAT be used in the college admission process, if at all? To better understand the role of the SAT it is important to review the history of the test and how it came to find its position of importance and controversy in our society.

## **History**

Before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if a college or university required potential students to take an entrance examination of any type, it used a self-created test with questions aimed at determining preparedness to succeed at that particular institution (Amberg, 2001). In 1900, as the number of such institution-specific admissions tests continued to increase, twelve colleges and universities in the northeastern United States decided to band together to form the

College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB). The main purposes of the CEEB (College Board) included creating fair, thorough, and uniform national college admissions examinations and serving as a liaison between high schools and colleges. Today the College Board includes over twenty thousand colleges, universities and secondary schools among its members.

In 1926, the College Board created the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) based on aptitude tests used by the U.S. Army in World War I. The SAT was the first standardized college entrance examination that could be used by students for the purpose of applying for admission to more than one institution (Syverson, 2007). The capability of testing a student's capacity to learn fit in well with the growing meritocratic beliefs of higher education. A college education should be available to everyone, not just the sons of the wealthy, and now a student from any background who scored well on the SAT had an increased opportunity for social mobility. The SAT allowed institutions to identify students from educationally and/or economically disadvantaged situations with the innate aptitude to flourish in a sound, supportive educational atmosphere.

In 1937, the College Board developed tests to measure achievement in specific subject areas. These were known as the Achievement Tests until 1990, when the SAT was renamed the SAT I Reasoning Test and the Achievement Tests were renamed the SAT II: Subject Tests. In the late 1940's, the College Board began utilizing the services of a private, nonprofit organization called the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to produce the SAT (Amberg, 2001). ETS was created by the College Board, the Carnegie Foundation, and the American Council on Education in 1948 (Kaplan, 1982). In addition to the SAT, ETS produces the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), and the National Teacher Examination (NTE) (Amberg, 2001). In 1993, the Scholastic Aptitude Test was renamed the Scholastic Assessment Test. In recent years,

however, SAT has lost its acronym status and the test is now known simply as the SAT (Syverson, 2007).

A college entrance examination similar to the SAT called the American College Testing Program (ACT) was introduced in 1959 and began being used as an admission criterion, primarily by colleges and universities in the Midwest. In recent years, the usage of the ACT by institutions of higher learning has increased nationwide and today most colleges and universities in the United States will accept ACT test scores along with, or in lieu of, the SAT for admission purposes. Even colleges with open admission policies frequently require that a student submit scores from one of the two tests. In 2005, 1.4 million students sat for the SAT and 1.2 million more took the ACT (Syverson, 2007). In March, 2005, the College Board revised the SAT adding a third part, the writing section, to its long-standing verbal and mathematics sections. At that time, the verbal section was slightly altered and renamed as the critical reading section. The College Board asserted its belief that these changes would increase the SAT's power to predict future college success (Hoover, 2008).

The SAT was not devised to be an intelligence test and is not considered as such. Scientists who have done extensive research on assessing intelligence do not consider the SAT and similar aptitude tests to be measures of intellectual abilities (Atkinson, 2001). In fact, ETS and the College Board describe the aptitude the SAT is designed to measure as acquired verbal and mathematical reasoning abilities, not an innate ability (Amberg, 2001). However, students who score high on the exam are generally seen as more intelligent than their peers. Students with high scores who have not performed well in high school are often labeled as underachievers, who perhaps were "not challenged" enough by their teachers. Such students are still quite often accepted for admission to even the more selective colleges and universities, while other students

with lower scores are not, despite having outstanding high school records (Syverson, 2007). SAT scores are also one of the main criteria for awarding academic merit scholarships at most colleges and universities. It is not uncommon for a student with lower scores to receive a lower monetary scholarship award or no award at all compared to others with identical high school performance records, but higher SAT scores (Wright, Palmer, & Miller, 1996).

The intentional or unintentional misuse of the SAT is just a small part of the criticism that ETS and the SAT have received in (Amberg, 2001). The belief that potential ability as measured on a test might be somehow more important than actual classroom achievement in determining preparedness for college has come under mounting criticism. This criticism has increasingly extended to questions about the actual ability of the SAT to make valid predictions of successful college academic performance, along with numerous claims of biases within the exam against minorities and students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. The criticism has reached the point that a report issued by the 11,000 member National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) in September, 2008 stated the opinion that colleges and universities should strive to develop ways to make appropriate admission decisions without requiring standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008).

Public doubt and concern about psychological testing of all types has existed ever since such tests were introduced in the early twentieth century. Such public scrutiny has compelled psychologists to continually reevaluate their methods and led to more scientific testing (Kaplan, 1982). In retrospect, the unprecedented criticism of the SAT appears to have its origins in a decline in the average test score that occurred between 1963 and 1980. During that period, the mean SAT verbal score dropped 54 points nationwide, from 478 to 424. The mean SAT

mathematics score dropped 36 points, from 502 to 466 (Amberg, 2001). There were many opinions offered about the reasons for the decline. These ranged from parental coddling to student drug use to the de-emphasis in foreign language study to women's liberation. In 1977, the College Board itself issued a rambling opinion on the reasons for the decline that suggested factors like the popularity of television and the disintegration of the American family way of life. Regardless of the precise cause(s), the decline in scores drew attention to the test and serious doubts about the SAT began to be voiced (Amberg, 2001). Perhaps the most virulent and noteworthy attacks came from consumer advocate Ralph Nader who in 1980 began campaigned publicly against standardized testing and the SAT in particular. Nader asserted his beliefs that the SAT was not a valid predictor of college success and that scores on the test reflected family income levels, rather than academic potential (Robinson, 1983). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has elevated the use of standardized testing to a level of pre-eminence and the elevated level of scrutiny given the meaning of the results of such tests now extends to the SAT (Smith & Smith, 2004).

### **Predictive Validity**

It is impossible to perfectly measure behavior or knowledge, and thus, there is no perfectly accurate predictor of a behavior that displays certain knowledge (Robinson, 1983). In any test that an individual takes such as the SAT there is error variance in one's score caused by such things as the health and emotional state of the test-taker, the environment (room temperature, lighting, seating, other people, etc.), and other mitigating factors. There is also error involved when determining a test's validity that stems from the individual background of each test-taker including, but not limited to, sex, ethnicity, age, experiences, and education level.

The validity of a test refers to the level of appropriateness of the inferences derived from its test scores (Kaplan, 1982). A test cannot be judged to have low or high validity in the abstract. Validity can only be determined in regard to a specific use of a test. The predictive validity of the SAT must be judged based on its ability to predict defined academic success (Robinson, 1983). ETS and the College Board have always maintained that the SAT predicts first-year college grades (Amberg, 2001). Hence, the validity of the test has traditionally been measured by correlating students' SAT scores from these tests taken in high school with the grades the same students earned during their first year in higher education as measured by their grade point average (GPA). The resulting statistical correlation has then been reported as a validity coefficient (Robinson, 1983).

Repeated studies have shown the simple correlation of students' SAT scores and their college freshman GPA to be low to moderate, usually between .30 and .50, with considerable variation within that range depending on the college major (Kaplan, 1982). Stumpf and Stanley (2002) say there are three likely reasons why the correlation is not strong. The first reason is that college admission officers have already screened their applicant pools and selected those students who appear likely to succeed at their institutions, thus using up most of the SAT's predictive value prior to the students' enrollment. The second reason is that college admissions officers most often accept students who have high SAT scores and high school GPAs, but also accept some students with high SAT scores and lower GPAs and some students with low SAT scores and high GPAs. In the latter two cases the predictive value of one is dependent on the level of the other which lowers the correlations between the predictors of the freshman GPA. The final reason is that so much variation exists among the content and difficulty level of freshman



college courses that the predictive value of SAT scores from these tests taken in high school is greatly reduced (Stumpf & Stanley, 2002).

ETS and the College Board have always maintained that SAT scores are best used to supplement other information, particularly a student's high school transcript, when making admissions decisions (Amberg, 2001). Proponents of the SAT say the great differences in high school academic difficulty and grading standards across the country reduce the value of high school transcripts alone as predictors of college success (Syverson, 2007). ETS reports the predictability of the high school record is improved 27 percent when supplemented by SAT scores (Amberg, 2001).

Most studies of the predictive validity of the SAT examine the correlation between SAT scores and freshman grades. However, Stumpf and Stanley (2002) analyzed the ability of the SAT to predict college persistence through to graduation. Their results showed that attrition, or the failure to graduate, was much more likely to occur with students who fell below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on their SAT math section. The authors attempt to explain this finding that they say "may seem odd" by suggesting it is possible that, although a relatively low proportion of college students major in areas where very strong math reasoning is required, most students at most institutions are required to take some courses in which math reasoning is needed as part of their general requirements toward graduation. Possessing a very low level of math reasoning might, therefore, lead to an inability for students to successfully pass enough courses to persist and graduate, regardless of major.

Bridgeman, Burton, and Pollack (2008) found in a multi-year validity study using graduating college students' cumulative GPAs that the high school GPA was a slightly better overall predictor of cumulative college GPA. However, the SAT was found to be a better

predictor for cumulative college GPA for male Asian, African American, and Hispanic students and female African American and Asian students (Bridgeman, Burton, & Pollack, 2008).

Many students about to take the SAT receive coaching and take test-preparation classes with the goal of bettering their chances of scoring high on the test. Many such services are rather expensive. How coaching and test-preparation might impact the validity of the SAT is unclear (Amberg, 2001). Until recent years, ETS and the College Board held firm to the opinion that test-preparation workshops and classes could not significantly improve students' SAT scores because the higher-order thinking skills that the SAT assessed could not be improved with short-term coaching (Syverson, 2007). This view was argued by those who believed coaching could enhance the performance of students with test-anxiety, students unfamiliar with test-taking strategies, and those students lacking the self-motivation to take advantage of the ETS-provided bulletins and SAT preparation tests (Amberg, 2001). Analysts predicted the addition of the Critical Writing section to the SAT in 2005 would add an additional \$200 million to a test-preparation industry already enjoying annual revenues of \$1 billion dollars (Syverson, 2007).

Apparently the College Board was convinced by the opposing view, or perhaps their own view of the bottom line, because in the year 2000 it reversed its long-espoused opinion and actually began selling test-preparation services of its own. The College Board has received further criticism on this front as the widespread marketing of costly SAT coaching and test-preparation classes, along with the fact that many of the more affluent high schools now include such test-preparation courses as part of their college preparatory curriculum, has come under fire by those who claim such practices discriminate against those poorer students who cannot afford to pay for this assistance (Syverson, 2007).

## **Bias Against Minorities**

The SAT has been the subject of increased criticism in recent years over a perceived bias against nonwhite groups of students. Although those who support standardized testing claim standardization creates a level playing field where students from all backgrounds are judged equally, there is widespread opinion that the SAT is unfair to African Americans and other minority students (Fleming & Garcia, 1998). There are others who say the SAT is in reality only a test of socioeconomic status (SES) (Sackett, et al., 2009). In fact, there are those who go so far as to assert that the SAT is simply a present day intellectual replacement for the prejudice practiced by the wealthy elite colleges that dominated American higher education while excluding minorities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Thomas, 2004).

According to Fleming (2000), standardized tests have been employed to obstruct the social progress of African Americans for at least 200 years. Early “scientific” observations posited that the size of the African and African American brain and skull made members of that race intellectually inferior to white Europeans. The first “intelligence” tests measured traits in which whites excelled, thus perpetuating this prejudice. Many believe the prejudice still carries on today as a bias against minorities in the SAT. African American students traditionally score as a group on average 200 points, or a full standard deviation, below their white counterparts. Fleming says this raises doubts as to whether historical societal prejudice and racism continue to play a role in making the test unfair.

Fleming (2000) says doubts about the relevance and validity of the SAT for testing academic aptitude and potential for African American students include questions of whether the SAT may be biased against minorities because test items make a working knowledge of the white middle-class experience necessary. Fleming found a latent bias in her examination of the

content of the reading portion of the test. Only 15.3 % of the questions concerned issues relevant to minority groups, while 41% were related to science-related issues, an area in which African American students traditionally are weakest. Fleming also found that 57% of the questions addressing African American issues were negative or culturally unflattering.

African American and Latino students consistently score lower on the SAT than their white peers, yet minority students have been shown to graduate from college with GPAs and class ranks that do not differ significantly from white students (Hunter & Sumter, 2000). Fleming and Garcia (1998) say that while the predictive validity of the SAT for white students as determined by the correlation between SAT scores and freshman college GPA has been found to be consistent over many studies, this has not been the case with the predictive validity of the test for minorities. There have been findings showing lack of prediction, underprediction, and overprediction. However, Fleming and Garcia say their studies show that while the SAT validity coefficient for African American students attending predominantly white colleges is lower than that for white students in general, the SAT has nearly the same predictive validity for African American students attending traditionally black colleges as that found for white students. The racial environment of the college attended seems to make a particular difference for black freshman male students.

In a study performed at Wake Forest University, it was found that, although there was little difference between African American and white students in their average high school class ranks and GPAs, there were considerable differences between their SAT scores, with the black students scoring significantly lower on average (Lawlor, Richman, & Richman, 1997). Yet, there was little difference between the two groups in their college GPAs upon graduation. Thus, the authors infer that if admission spots and scholarships were awarded primarily based on SATs, a

disproportionate share would go to white students compared to black, even though their high school and eventual college performances showed no differences. Lawlor, Richman, and Richman believe the SAT is a biased predictor of college performance and based on their data state that if the SAT is to continue to be used as an admission criterion, 80 points should be added to the total of all African American applicants to their institution.

In addition to possible bias within the SAT, there are other factors surrounding the examination that may impact upon the performance of minority students on the test. One of these factors has been labeled “stereotype threat” (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele and Aronson have shown evidence that the awareness of minority students of the traditionally lower scores earned by their groups on standardized tests can serve as a psychological threat that causes distraction that can actually lead to negative performance outcomes such as lower SAT scores. In a related study, Walpole, McDonough, Bauer, Gibson, Kanyi, and Toliver (2005) investigated how the perceptions and knowledge of standardized college admissions testing among urban African American and Latino high school students might affect the scores of these students. The authors employed a conceptual framework using the concepts of cultural capital and habitus and used interview data from a larger study of 227 African American and Latino students during their junior and senior years in high school. Questions were asked relative to the students’ knowledge of college admissions tests such as the PSAT, SAT I, SAT II, and ACT. The students were also questioned about their preparation and strategies for taking the tests, along with issues of anxiety and fairness. The authors believe the results show that African American and Latino students experience a good deal of pressure and anxiety about taking these tests. The students’ habitus featured test-taking strategies of taking advantage of free or low-cost preparation assistance and repeated test-taking in the hope of achieving better scores. The authors maintain that the scarcity

of resources to pay for such tests, the lack of adequate test preparation, and the pressure to attain good scores combine to have a negative impact upon the success of minority high school students on such tests.

### **A Measure of Class**

A study of students entering college in 1989-90 showed that ten times as many were from families in the highest SES quartile compared to those from families in the lowest SES quartile, (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Almost half of all high school students in the lowest SES quartile did not enter college at all; five times the rate of nonenrollment of those in the highest SES quartile. Public institutions that formerly provided opportunities for higher education to low SES students have become increasingly middle and upper class due to the decreased level of opportunity for academic preparation available to low SES students, along with tuitions that are increasingly beyond their abilities to pay. Clearly, there is still a socioeconomic division between those who attend college and those who do not. The College Board maintains that one of the SAT's greatest merits is that it evaluates students from all backgrounds based on merit, calling it a vast improvement over earlier times when only the privileged few could gain entrance to higher education. However, as far back as Ralph Nadar in 1980, critics have claimed that SAT scores primarily reflect social class and that their use by college admissions officers today only perpetuates the aristocracy of yesteryear (Kaplan, 1982). Zwick (2002) goes so far as to label it a "wealth test." The critics say this is a direct result of the academic college preparatory curriculum, test-preparation courses, and SAT coaching that students in affluent high schools receive, but not to an actual increased level in higher SES students of the aptitude for future college success the test is designed to measure (Sackett, et al., 2009). The same critics claim that

college grading is also biased toward high-SES students, so that any appearance of predictive validity as a result of SAT and freshman grade correlations is also an artifact.

Geiser and Studley (2002) found that using high school GPA as an admission criterion had a much lower negative effect on the probability of admission for low SES students than using SAT scores. Atkinson (2001) says that after controlling for SES, any relationship between SAT scores and grades earned at the University of California almost totally disappeared. However, an examination of multiple large data sets containing data on SAT scores, SES, and freshman college grades from several institutions produced consistent results in opposition to Atkinson's claim (Sackett, et al., 2009). SES was found to be highly correlated with SAT scores ( $r = .420$ ). Also, SAT scores were found to be substantially correlated with college grades ( $r = .470$ ).

### **Aptitude Versus Achievement**

As stated earlier, since 1937 the College Board has offered tests to measure achievement in specific subject areas. These were known as the Achievement Tests until 1990 when they were renamed the SAT II: Subject Tests (Amberg, 2001). In 2001, University of California (UC) President Richard C. Atkinson announced his institution's intention, based on his recommendation, to eliminate the SAT as a requirement for admission and to instead require achievement tests like the SAT II that assess students' mastery of particular subject areas (Geiser & Studley, 2002). When President Atkinson presented his beliefs in a speech to the American Council on Education (ACE) in Washington, D.C. in February, 2001, it prompted a national debate over the validity and use of the SAT in college admissions. The UC President says, "I was unprepared for the intense public reaction to my remarks" (Atkinson, 2001, p. 31).

Atkinson explains that he is not against the use of standardized tests in general, but that the SAT is based on an antiquated belief that a student's innate mental abilities could be defined and measured (Atkinson, 2001). He states, "Few scientists who have considered these matters seriously would argue that aptitude tests such as the SAT provide a true measure of intellectual abilities" (Atkinson, 2001, p. 32). Atkinson feels achievement tests better assess what is learned in the high school curriculum and present more definitive standards of what students are expected to accomplish in order to be admitted into college, while at the same time providing incentives for the high schools to improve their curriculums. In addition, Atkinson expresses the belief that a criterion like the SAT that emphasizes potential ability over demonstrated achievement probably has a negative impact on the chances of poor and minority students to gain college admission. Geiser and Studley (2002) appear to confirm this view as their data showed that when UC applicants were ranked by SAT scores, half as many African-American, Latino, and Native American students fell into the top quintile as when the same students were ranked by high school grades.

The predictive validity of the SAT II: Subject Tests has not been studied to a great extent because the SAT II tests have not been required by a large number of colleges and universities (Geiser & Studley, 2002). The University of California is a major exception, having required both the SAT and the SAT II of its applicants since 1968. Geiser and Studley say this gives that institution a unique opportunity to compare the relative capability of the two tests to predict college success. The authors studied the relative influence of the high school grade point average, SAT, and SAT II scores on the freshman GPAs of 77,893 students who entered the University of California from Fall 1996 through Fall 1999. Geiser and Studley say their results show the SAT II achievement tests were consistently superior to the SAT in predicting freshman



college performance across all UC campuses for students from all high schools and in all majors. Their study also shows high school grades were a much better predictor of freshman grades than SAT scores and when predictions were made based on a combination of high school grades and SAT II scores, SAT scores added nothing to the predictions.

### **Test-Optional Admissions**

A review of the literature has shown that the SAT has been increasingly criticized on many fronts in recent years. This criticism has covered the content of the SAT itself, along with the use and misuse of the test in both the college admissions process and the college rating process, the latter being a purpose for which it was never designed to be used (Zwick, 2002). There have always been colleges, and to a lesser extent universities, who have not required the SAT or ACT for admission purposes. These institutions were usually either much less selective, such as community colleges, or highly specialized, such as music or art schools (Syverson, 2007). However, the growing criticism and doubts concerning the SAT have led an ever-increasing number of more selective colleges and universities to institute or consider instituting policies that make the SAT an optional part of their admissions decision processes.

In 2008, the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), the leading organization of college admissions officers whose by-laws are most consistently followed by four-year institutions, created a commission to study the use of standardized testing in the admissions process (NACAC, 2008). In September, 2008, the NACAC Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admissions issued the following recommendation:

Although many colleges benefit in using admission tests in admissions decisions, it is the view of the Commission that there may be more colleges and universities that could make appropriate admissions decisions without requiring standardized admission tests such as

the ACT and SAT. The Commission encourages institutions to consider dropping the admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test or the admission policies of the institution (such as open access) support the decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising, or research (p.7).

The Commission's report went on to recommend the greater use of admission exams like the SAT II subject tests that are more closely associated with high school curriculum, saying such tests measure knowledge of high school subject matter "to a much greater extent than the SAT and ACT" and are "more predictive of first-year and overall grades (NACAC, 2008, p.7)."

Bridgeman, Burton, and Cline (2003) studied the effects of replacing the SAT with SAT II subject tests in the freshman admission process in the University of California system. The selection of students using a combination of SAT II scores and high school GPA was compared to a model of selection from the same applicant pool using SAT scores and high school GPA. The authors say the immediate effects of this altered approach to admissions are relatively small as their data shows about 90 % of the same students would have been selected using either method. The ethnic makeup of the classes would also be almost identical, with the exception that a larger number of Hispanic students would be admitted if the SAT II Spanish subject test was utilized in the process (Bridgeman, Burton & Cline, 2003).

Regardless of whether the SAT or SAT II subject tests are used in the admissions process, standardized tests are limited in what they can measure. In recent years, however, research has led to the development of new assessment tools designed to measure noncognitive traits that could predict success in college (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007). Utilizing these tools along with high school transcripts, rankings, and SAT scores could provide admissions officers with a

more comprehensive assessment of applicants. One such tool, called the Steinberg Triarchic Abilities Test (STAT), was created by Robert Steinberg in 1999 (Steinberg, 2004). The STAT is designed to measure what Steinberg calls “successful intelligence.” It was created as a result of a study supported by the College Board called the Rainbow Project in which Steinberg tested the successful intelligence levels of 800 college students. Successful intelligence is said to include analytical intelligence (what the SAT is designed to measure), “practical” intelligence and “creative” intelligence. After administering the multiple-choice STAT, the predictive ability of the STAT was compared to the SAT and high school GPA. Steinberg found the SAT and high school GPA used together accounted for about 16 % of the variance in predicting college GPA. Adding the STAT scores increased the variance to 24% and when compared to either the SAT or high school GPA alone, the STAT had double the predictive ability. Also, further analysis showed a significantly smaller gap between students of different racial backgrounds on the STAT than on the SAT (Steinberg, 2004).

Syverson (2007) says colleges and universities that wish to continue using standardized tests for admissions purposes should possess institution-specific data that displays the predictive value of such tests at their institutions and that admissions officers at those institutions should have a clear knowledge of the significance of the predictive value of these tests. Such data usually focuses on the freshman year GPA of the institutions’ students. Syverson says one major weakness in this approach is that, even with data supporting the predictive value of standardized tests employed by an institution, such tests cannot predict the creativity necessary for success in fine and performing arts courses. Another weakness is that most predictive models do not account for the effect of the large proportion of required general education courses freshmen at

most colleges must take which, in many cases, may not be subjects in which the students are strong in (Syverson, 2007).

Some of the more selective colleges and universities have instituted test-optional admissions policies in recent years for various reasons. A number of schools have made this decision claiming it is consistent with their institutional mission (Syverson, 2007). Some have become test-optional because they feel the negative impact on students of requiring the SAT is greater than any value such tests have in their admissions processes. Others have done so because they believe such a policy may enable them to attract a more diverse group of applicants. However, Zwick (1999) says eliminating standardized test scores and putting more emphasis on high school achievement will not lead to a significant change in ethnic diversity because it is more a lack of college-preparatory courses than low test scores that is the main barrier to higher education for many minority students.

Syverson (2007) says with some institutions the choice to become test-optional has simply been a marketing decision founded on the anticipation that doing so will create some much-needed publicity for their school. Another acknowledged motivation for becoming test-optional is the market-driven expectation that applicants with higher SAT scores would be more likely to submit their scores if doing so was optional, while those with lower scores would be less likely. These institutions expect the emphasis on the average SAT of freshman applicants in the college ratings process utilized by U.S. News and World Report and other such publications will result in an increased academic profile for the institution and, thus, a higher rating and increased prestige among the public and other institutions (Syverson, 2007). Mattson (2007) put it bluntly saying, “Higher education administrators need to ... ask themselves if SAT scores are

used so heavily in the college admission process because they are predictors of academic success, or because they are linked with the college ranking systems” (p. 12)?

## **Conclusion**

This review of the literature has shown the history of the SAT and the many ways its use has been questioned and criticized. The SAT has been the flagship for the belief that students should be judged for admission into institutions of higher education based on their ability to learn, more so than what they have learned (Geiser, 2008). There are those who support the use of examinations like the SAT in the college admissions process, those who oppose the use of standardized tests, and those who believe the best option is to make the submission of standardized test scores optional. Looking at the overall picture, Geiser (2008) declares,

College admissions may never be a perfectly fair and rational process, but it can be fairer and more rational than it is today if we judge students on what really matters. Our first consideration should not be how an applicant compares with others, but whether he or she demonstrates sufficient mastery of college-preparatory subjects to benefit and succeed in college. When we apply that standard, as admissions officers well know, we will find that we have many more qualified candidates than spaces available, and our candidate pool will be more diverse. (p. 6)

The research study outlined in the following chapter is designed to look at the overall picture of the current use of the SAT in the admissions process at Rowan University. The overriding goal of this study is to determine whether the current admissions policy at Rowan requiring the submission of SAT scores by freshman applicants does indeed serve to best determine whether potential students have the ability to succeed at this university.

## Chapter III: Methodology

### Introduction

This convergent parallel design mixed methods study seeks to answer questions concerning the use of SAT scores in the admissions process at Rowan University where I serve as Director of Admissions. First, are SAT scores a valid predictor of freshman success at Rowan University? Second, in what ways does the study indicate that the SAT should or should not be a required component of the admissions process for freshman applicants to Rowan University? And, third, how will addressing the current use of the SAT in the admissions process and any potential changes in that use impact my leadership in the Office of Admissions and throughout the university?

Mixed methods research combines data drawn from both qualitative and quantitative research based on the belief that “the use of quantitative and qualitative data approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p.5).” Qualitative and quantitative data are mixed “concurrently by combining them (or merging them), sequentially by having one build on the other, or embedding one within the other (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p.5).”

Qualitative research is done in naturalistic settings; utilizes descriptive data, including interview transcripts and field notes; is concerned with processes, rather than just outcomes; and employs inductive data analysis that searches for meaning (Glesne, 2006). Quantitative research, on the other hand, is structured and experimental in nature; is designed to test hypotheses; reduces data to numerical indices; and analyzes the data statistically in order to form generalizations that can be applied to other similar situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Although qualitative and quantitative research procedures are more often than not performed

separately, it is sometimes useful to use the two methods together in one study (Fielding & Fielding, 1986) and mixed methods studies are becoming increasingly more prevalent (Creswell, 2009).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) say a mixed methods study can be justified when “a second method is needed to enhance a primary approach ... and an overall research objective can be best addressed with multiple phases (p. 8).” The authors say a mixed methods approach can be particularly justified when the possibility exists that the results garnered from qualitative and quantitative data in one study may be contradictory. A convergent parallel mixed methods design is recommended “when the researcher wants to triangulate the methods by directly comparing and contrasting quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings for corroboration and validation purposes (p. 77).”

### **Context**

Data for this mixed methods research study was collected on the campus of Rowan University, located in Glassboro, New Jersey. Rowan is a public university with an enrollment slightly over 11,000 students. Approximately 8,700 of these students are full-time undergraduates. I have been employed at the institution for 17 years. After first serving as the Associate Director of Admissions, I became the Director of Admissions six years ago.

The Office of Admissions is part of the Division of Academic Affairs at Rowan. The main goals of the Office of Admission are to recruit and enroll a sufficient number of students to meet the new matriculated undergraduate student enrollment needs of the university as determined by the upper administration for both the fall and spring semesters each year. These students consist of first-time freshmen, external transfer students, and former students applying for readmission to the institution. The primary goal is to achieve the total enrollment targets set

by the administration. The main secondary goals are to maintain or increase the academic profile of the incoming classes, to achieve the enrollment targets determined for individual majors and to increase student diversity.

As Director of Admissions, I supervise a professional staff consisting of an associate director and five assistant directors, along with twelve clerical/support staff members. The office also includes a very large student worker contingent, the Admissions Ambassadors, numbering approximately 60 students. In my position, I interact extensively with the public and with a variety of constituents at all levels across the university. I am a member of the Academic Affairs Council which includes the Provost, the Deans of Rowan's seven colleges and library, and other managers in the division. My position situates me advantageously within the context where this study was performed, giving me knowledge of and access to the necessary qualitative research participants and quantitative research statistical data.

### **Research phases**

Five research phases were completed in this mixed methods study. The first phase consisted of interviews with four Rowan University assistant directors of admissions conducted in October 2009. The assistant directors read and make decisions on the bulk of the freshman applications for admission to Rowan. Their views on the use of SAT scores in the decision-making process at Rowan will be important to garner. The assistant directors also deal extensively with prospective students, their parents, and high school guidance counselors. Thus, I hoped to gather their perceptions of the public's view of the use of the SAT in admissions at Rowan and elsewhere. The qualitative data from the interviews of the assistant directors was coded and analyzed to ascertain relevant patterns and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2006).



The interviews with the Rowan Office of Admissions four assistant directors of admissions were held in the Office of admissions conference room in October, 2009. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended (see Appendix B). A consent form (appendix A) was provided to protect the rights of the participants. Acknowledging that the researcher in this study is the supervisor of the participants, it was stressed that participation in the study was voluntary and the employee/employer relationship that exists between the participant and researcher would not be affected in any way by participation or nonparticipation in this study.

In the second phase of this study, quantitative data comparing students' SAT scores, high school GPAs, and freshman year GPAs were collected and analyzed to determine the predictive validity of the SAT in determining freshman success at Rowan was collected and analyzed. The emerging perception of the status of the use of the SAT in the Rowan freshman admissions process drawn from the combined analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data in phases one and two, along with my personal reflections on the process captured through journaling and field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) provided guidance in following through on the final three phases.

The third research phase of this mixed methods study consisted of a focus group of current Rowan students. As a convenience sample, an existing campus student organization, the Admissions Ambassadors, was utilized. Focus groups are very useful when the researcher wishes to stimulate talk from multiple perspectives on a given topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The topic in this case, was the students' feelings and opinions on the use of the SAT in the freshman admissions process at Rowan (Appendix D). The Admissions Ambassadors provided a rather broad perspective as the organization consists of a very diverse group of students from all four undergraduate class levels in the university. The focus group was conducted during the Ambassador training week, before classes begin in August of 2010. An audio recording was

made of the focus group. The qualitative data from participant responses was coded and analyzed for emerging themes and patterns. Field notes and journaling provided additional richness to the analysis of this portion of the third phase (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Researchers use purposive samples for interviews when they desire to garner a wealth of information from a small number of subjects and, “therefore, the researcher selects cases that are information-rich in regards to those questions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009, p. 173).” The fourth phase of this study consisted of interviews with a purposive sample of Rowan faculty and administrators selected based on their involvement as academic advisors and/or as teachers with Rowan freshman students. The faculty members interviewed consisted of two Caucasian females and one African-American male, all three with significant experience teaching and advising freshman students. The academic advisors included one Caucasian female, one African-American female, and one Caucasian male. The primary counselees of the three advisors are freshman students. These interviews were performed in September and October of 2010. The qualitative data from the interviews of the faculty and administrators was coded and analyzed to ascertain relevant patterns and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The final research phase of this study consisted of a survey of New Jersey high school guidance counselors conducted in November of 2010. This survey was done online in an attempt to elicit data concerning the views of as many of the state’s guidance counselors as possible on the general subject of SAT-optional admissions and the specific subject of a potential change in policy to SAT-optional admissions at Rowan University.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

### **Phase One**

Phase One aimed to examine the perceptions Rowan admissions officers have of the use of the SAT in freshman admissions at the university. The existing admissions policy at Rowan University requires that all applicants for undergraduate admission with less than 24 college credits earned must submit standardized test scores along with their high school and college transcripts when applying for admission to Rowan. The literature suggests that, based on the many doubts about and criticisms of the use of standardized test scores in college admissions, such an SAT-required policy should at the very least be examined to determine if it still remains relevant and appropriate. Tam and Sukhatme (2004) assert, “Admissions officers must ascertain which attributes, singly and in combination, provide the best indicators of subsequent university success” (p.13). I believe interviewing the admissions officers who read and make the bulk of the decisions on freshman applications is a logical first step in examining the situation at Rowan. Sereci, Zannetti, and Berger (2003) say that much more research has been performed to investigate how potential students decide upon a college choice, than on how college admissions officers choose the students for their institutions. The assistant directors’ views on the use of SAT scores in the decision-making process at Rowan are important to garner. The assistant directors also deal extensively with prospective students, their parents, and high school guidance counselors. Thus, their perceptions of the public’s view of the use of the SAT in admissions at Rowan and elsewhere should be elicited.

### **Design and Procedure**

Qualitative research is done in naturalistic settings; utilizes descriptive data, including interview transcripts and fieldnotes and employs inductive data analysis that searches for

meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Phase One of this study consisted of tape-recorded semi-structured interviews of four assistant directors of admissions done in the natural setting of the Office of Admissions. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed in conjunction with field notes made by the researcher during the process. After asking each participant to read and sign a consent form (Appendix A), the interviews were conducted consisting of eight open-ended questions listed in the interview protocol (Appendix B).

Semi-structured interviews give the participants the freedom to express their thoughts so that the researcher may search for varied themes in the data, while asking the same questions consistently of each participant provides sufficient structure for comparison (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2006). The interviews were transcribed and the data coded and an analysis outlined created from the coding to make relevant themes more apparent to the researcher. Using these themes, inferences were derived from the data.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data by interviewing four assistant directors of admissions at Rowan University. The interviews were tape-recorded in the Rowan Admissions Office conference room during the third week of October of 2009 and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. I created typed transcripts of the interviews by listening to the recordings and typing everything I heard. I then printed out the transcripts and went through them line by line, making handwritten notations about the responses and their frequencies from which I created a typed data analysis. Using the background knowledge I acquired from my review of the literature about the uses and criticisms of the SAT, along with my own extensive experience as an admissions officer, this outline was created based on my desire to search for response data groupings pertinent to seeking an answer to the question of

whether SAT scores should continue to be a required component of the freshman admission decision-making process at Rowan.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis involves the systematic organization of interview transcripts, researcher field notes, and other qualitative information to enable the researcher to understand the data and report those findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative data analysis was employed in this study as an appropriate means to gain an understanding data resulting from the interviews of the four assistant directors of admissions. An analysis of the data in Phase One of this study showed consistent patterns of responses to the questions from all participants as the four admissions officers interviewed seem to verbalize a commonly-held set of beliefs and opinions the analysis of which led to several emergent themes.

### **Emergent Themes**

The participants all answered the first question concerning the most important components of high school students' academic profile for predicting college success in a fairly consistent manner. Every participant stressed the importance of the high school transcript and a review of the student's coursework over the four years from 9th through 12th grade, including the strength of students' schedule and track they are on (general, honors, etc.). Involvement in extracurricular activities was also seen as an important indicator of the time management skills necessary for success in college. In addition, prospective student interviews were mentioned as helpful, particularly for special admissions programs.

The participants also agreed in unison that SAT scores should be given minimal weight in the admissions decision process. If students have proven themselves in high school with high grades in strong college-prep courses over the four years, this was seen by all participants as

deserving of much more weight in the admission decision process than SAT test scores.

Participant 4 talked of the “kids that I know would be successful here, but because of the SAT they’ve been knocked out of the process.” Participant 4 thought “we should be tossing the whole idea of a gauge such as an SAT.”

The participants expressed consistent perceptions of the public’s view of test-optional college admissions, saying they believe the majority of students, parents, and guidance counselors would welcome test-optional admissions. They cited the stress on both the students and parents surrounding the taking of the test and the belief prevailing belief that good students are kept out of Rowan by low SAT scores. Participant 3 even described a sign on her personal office wall that says, “My child doesn’t test well.” Several participants did note, however, that they believe there would be some members of the public who would want the SAT to be required because they or their child scored well and, thus, would like that advantage over those who scored less well in the applicant pool.

Question 4 concerning the potential positive outcomes of changing to test-optional admissions elicited perhaps the most universally strong common response in the study. All the assistant directors firmly asserted that the most positive outcome of switching to test-optional admissions in their views would be an increase in freshman applications for admission to Rowan. In addition, several also stated they believe such a policy change would result in an overall better quality of student being admitted.

Question 5 which asked about potential negative outcomes of changing to test-optional admissions drew the least consistent responses among the four interviewees. Those that did give an answer each tempered their responses as not being very significant negative outcomes. Participant 1 expressed a concern about losing potential applicants who might not feel happy

about applying to a school when they have done well on the SAT, yet students who did not score high could still be admitted. Participant 2 raised a concern about finding ways to select students for admission without the currently heavily-weighted SAT, asking, “We have thousands of students that have similar GPA’s, similar academic records, so how do you separate them and decide who to admit and who not to admit?” Participant 3 expressed worries about fairness in the evaluation and assessment of candidates if alternatives to the SAT are employed. Participant 4 saw no negative outcomes at all.

When asked in question 6 about the effects changing to test-optional admissions might have on the incoming freshman class at Rowan, an improvement in the academic quality and an increase in diversity were the outcomes mentioned.

When asked which students would benefit most from changing to test-optional admissions, the consistent response from the assistant directors cited those high-quality students who have good grades with strong college preparatory courses, but who just do not score well on the SAT for a variety of reasons. Participant 2 also noted the potential of test-optional admissions to benefit students with learning disabilities who are able to overcome those disabilities in the classroom, but are unable to compete successfully in comparison to others in standardized tests scores.

Finally, in reply to question 8 asking who might be negatively impacted by a switch to test-optional admissions, the prevailing response was once again those students who did well on the test and would lose the advantage they have over those who scored less well in the competition for admission.

### **Interpretations**

The following major interpretations emerged from the data in Phase One:

The Rowan admissions officers interviewed expressed the opinion that high school transcript (grades, strength of courses, four –year performance) are a much better predictor of college performance than SAT scores. Participant one said, “I would have to say the most important component of a students’ academic profile for me would be how they handle their coursework throughout their four years in high school.” Participant two echoed this opinion, saying, “Overall, the high school transcript, in my opinion, is the ...biggest thing we should be looking at in terms of what’s gonna predict... success” Participant three agreed, saying, “I tend to believe that the ... high school transcript is the strongest indicator of a students’ performance. Participant four made it unanimous by saying, ‘I think the...high school transcript, what they’ve done over a four year period ... really gives us a more accurate reflection of what their success would be in college.’”

All of the Rowan admissions officers interviewed expressed the opinion that SAT scores should be given minimal weight in the admission decision process, especially when the student has performed well academically in high school. Participant one stated, “I don’t really think it should be given that much weight if a student has proven that they can do the work in high school. If they come in with a very high GPA, they are taking good classes in high school, in college prep at the AP level, the test really wouldn’t be a huge indicator of how well they would do in college.” Participant two said, “In general I don’t think schools should put a lot of weight on the SAT’s. I think there’s other things that we can use to determine whether or not they’ll be successful in college.” Participant three went even further, describing herself as “a person who thought we should be tossing the whole idea of a gauge such as an SAT or this testing.” Participant four lamented “kids that I know that would be successful here, at Rowan, but because of the SAT’s, it’s, they’ve been knocked out of the process.” He continued, “I don’t think much



weight should be given to, to the SAT scores.”

The Rowan admissions officers believe the majority of prospective students, parents and guidance counselors would welcome SAT-optional admissions at Rowan. Participant one said, “I think the public’s opinion ... will be pretty positive.” He spoke of what he perceived high school guidance counselors would think, saying, “A lot of times the counselors speak to me and they discuss what a great student that person is and they think they will make a great asset to our school. However, because their SAT scores are lower, we could not get them in, so I think the ... perception for them would be pretty positive as well.” Participant two talked of the public reaction to other institutions that have gone SAT-optional and said, “I think the public ... is supportive of going test optional. A lot of schools have done it ...you know, I have colleagues from other schools where they have done it and it’s been very popular and it’s been very successful, and I think that being a state school in New Jersey ... I think this would be, this would look very good for us.” Participant three spoke of conversations she has had with parents who were” talking about how they feel the weight should not be distributed based on those test scores and the unfairness of the testing.” Participant four noted that students and parents of students who scored high on the SAT might not welcome SAT-optional admissions as much as those who did not score high, saying, “I think it would be more for those that are not than for those that are scoring high. They would welcome test-optional.”

Finally, the Rowan admissions officers expressed the opinion that a change to test-optional admissions would lead to an increase in freshman applications and lead to a more diverse freshman class. Participant one summed it up by stating, “The number of students applying to Rowan would go up, because I think in the past the SAT scores have scared some applicants away ... and made them shy away from applying to the school. So overall, we would

be attracting a more diverse population of students applying to the college and students may have different and unique talents to offer to Rowan than we normally would not have gotten.”

Participant agreed, saying, “From the standpoint of numbers, I think it’s going to increase the number of applications we receive which is our ultimate goal.” Participant three added, “I can see definitely an increase in the application ... which is definitely a plus. But I can also see ... in terms of the quality of the students and the profile that we’ll receive in terms of the people who would apply ... if there’s no testing.” And participant four said simply, “I think we would get more applications .... I think we would get a better quality of student.”

### **Inference**

The interpretations of the data collected Phase One combine to strongly suggest that the Rowan admissions assistant directors all believe that test-optional freshman admissions should at least be a topic of future consideration at the university. All four admissions officers expressed the belief that high school transcript are a much better predictor of college performance than SATs. All four assistant directors expressed the opinion that SAT scores should be given minimal weight in the admission decision process. All four assistant directors expressed the belief that prospective students, parents and guidance counselors would welcome SAT-optional admissions at Rowan. Finally, all four assistant directors expressed the opinion that switching to test-optional admissions would bring an increase in freshman applications and lead to a more diverse freshman class. Combining these four major themes drawn from the data, one must infer that in the collective opinion of the four assistant directors of admission, a change to test-optional admissions has enough positive aspects to it to warrant strong consideration by university officials.

### **Phase One Conclusions**

The interviews with the four assistant directors of admission at Rowan University in this study resulted in the collection of qualitative data the interpretation of which indicates a negative view of the current SAT-required admissions policy as the admissions officers interviewed consistently expressed the opinion that SAT scores should be given minimal weight in the admission decision process, especially when the student has performed well academically in high school. A strong positive view of a potential change to test-optional admissions was gleaned from the interview data as the admissions officers, The participants consistently expressed their opinions that high school transcript (grades, strength of courses, four –year performance) are a much better predictor of college performance than SAT scores; that the majority of prospective students, parents and guidance counselors would welcome SAT-optional admissions at Rowan; and that a change to test-optional admissions would lead to an increase in freshman applications and lead to a higher quality and more diverse freshman class.

The obvious clear inference one must take from the interpretations of the data collected is that, at least in the opinions of the four assistant directors of admission interviewed, a change in policy from SAT-required to test-optional freshman admissions should, at the very least, be an idea to be considered by those involved in or affected by the admissions process at the university.

### **Phase Two**

Mixed methods research utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research approaches with the goal of strengthening a study beyond the capabilities of either qualitative or quantitative research methods alone. Quantitative research is utilized to examine the relationship between variables using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009). This study employs a mixed method

research approach. Phase Two contains the quantitative component of this study. This quantitative component consists of a two statistical analyses of the relationship between the SAT scores and end-of-freshman-year grade point averages for full-time, first-time freshman students who enrolled at Rowan University in the fall and completed their entire first year at the institution. One analysis was done for the freshman students who entered in the fall of 2007 and the other for the freshman students who entered in the fall of 2008. The statistical analyses in Phase Two were conducted utilizing the College Board's Admitted Class Evaluation Service (ACES). ACES is a free service provided to accredited institutions to validate the use of the SAT in their admissions decisions

The Family Educational rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) permits educational institutions to disclose personally identifiable information such as grade point averages from their records without parental or student consent to "organizations conducting studies for, or on behalf of, educational agencies or institutions for the purpose of developing, validating, or administering predictive tests". 20 U.S.C.A. § 1232g(b)(1)(F); see 34 C.F.R. § 99.31(a)(6)(i)(A). This provision recognizes that organizations such as the College Board need data from student records in order to validate tests that colleges and universities employ to predict the potential success of their applicants for admission. Joint Statement in Explanation of Buckley/Pell Amendment, 120 Cong. Rec. 39862, 39863 (Dec. 13, 1974).

As the Director of Admissions at Rowan University, I am responsible for the oversight and maintenance of all university admissions data. I am also the representative of the university empowered to grant access to admissions data to other entities, both within the university and without, in accordance with FERPA law and institutional policies. ACES validity tests are requested periodically by the Director of Admissions to provide data useful for analyzing

admitted student success at the institution. The ACES validity test for the entering classes of fall 2008 and 2007 were requested and data submitted on August 2 and 16, 2010, respectively. Both ACES test results reports were received from the College Board on September 28, 2010.

### **Design and Procedure**

ACES studies are requested using an online form and data is submitted directly and securely over the internet. Variables used as predictors in ACES validity studies typically include high school grade point average (GPA) and SAT scores. ACES studies employ univariate analyses for individual predictors and multivariate analyses that include regression analyses used to obtain predictor weights. The variables used in the ACES reports for the Rowan fall 2007 and fall 2008 freshman classes included a criterion score, the students' final freshman year GPA at Rowan; a high school measure of academic achievement, the students, high school GPA; and the students' SAT scores (Educational Testing Service, 2010a,2010b).

### **Data Collection**

The records of 1173 students who entered Rowan University in the fall of 2007 and completed their freshman year in May of 2008 were included in the first ACES study. The criterion scores, the students' final freshman year GPAs at Rowan, were collected from Rowan's Banner student database. The students' high school GPAs were collected from the Rowan Banner student database where they had been entered as indicated on the students' official high school transcripts during the admission application process. The SAT scores in the ACES study were defined as the students' highest combined Critical Reading and Math score drawn from the College Board's records (Educational Testing Service, 2010a).

The records of 1059 students who entered Rowan University in the fall of 2008 and completed their freshman year in May of 2009 were included in the second ACES study. As in

the first ACES study, the criterion scores, the students' final freshman year GPAs at Rowan, were collected from Rowan's Banner student database. The students' high school GPAs were again collected from the Rowan Banner student database where they had been entered as indicated on the students' official high school transcripts during the admission application process. Also, again, the SAT scores in this ACES study were defined as the students' highest combined Critical Reading and Math score drawn from the College Board's records (Educational Testing Service, 2010b).

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Correlations measure the strength of relationships between variables. Strong correlations are defined as those of 0.40 or greater, moderate relations are less than 0.40 and greater than 0.24, while weak correlations are defined as 0.24 or lower (Croxtton, Cowden, and Klien. 1968). In the study for the freshman students entering in the fall of 2007, the correlation calculated by using the criterion score of the students' freshman year GPA and the individual variable of their combined Critical Reading and Math score was 0.36. This represents a moderate correlation. The correlation calculated by using the criterion score of the students' freshman year GPA and the individual variable of their high school GPA was a much higher 0.53. This represents a strong correlation (Educational Testing Service, 2010a). In the study for the freshman students entering in the fall of 2008, the correlation calculated by using the criterion score of the students' freshman year GPA and the individual variable of their combined Critical Reading and Math score was once again 0.36, a moderate correlation. The correlation calculated by using the criterion score of the students' freshman year GPA and the individual variable of their high school GPA was once again a much higher 0.53, representing a strong correlation. The results of the two studies are found in Table 1 (Educational Testing Service, 2010b).

Table 1  
*College Board ACES Studies Results*

Year	n	Criterion	Variable	Correlation
2007	1173	Freshman GPA	SAT CR+M	0.36
2007	1173	Freshman GPA	HS GPA	0.53
2008	1059	Freshman GPA	SAT CR+M	0.36
2008	1059	Freshman GPA	HS GPA	0.53

*Note:* n = First-time, full-time fall freshmen who completed their freshman year.

### **Phase Two Conclusions**

Phase Two of this study consisted of the use of two statistical analyses of the relationship between the variables SAT scores and high school GPAs and the criterion end-of-freshman-year grade point averages for 1173 full-time, first-time freshman students who enrolled at Rowan University in the fall of 2007 and 1059 full-time, first-time freshman students who enrolled at Rowan University in the fall of 2008. Only the students who completed their entire first year at the institution were included in the two studies. The statistical analyses were obtained through the use of the College Board's Admitted Class Evaluation Service (ACES). The analyses of the two Rowan fall freshman classes showed extremely consistent results. The same correlations were found for the variables in both studies despite their differing freshman class sizes. The analyses showed the correlations calculated using the students' freshman year GPA and combined Critical Reading and Math SAT score were moderate. The analyses showed the correlations calculated with the students' freshman year GPA and high school GPA were strong. One must conclude from this evidence from the analyses of the data from the fall 2007 and 2008 freshman classes that the students' SAT scores were only a moderate predictor of their freshman

year academic success as measured by their first year GPAs, while their high school GPAs were much better predictors of such success.

### **Phase Three**

First used in market research, a focus group is a type of qualitative research involving a group interview of subjects, usually seven to ten people, aimed at gathering the opinions, beliefs, and opinions of those involved about a particular topic. The aim is to create conversation among the group members that may stimulate and elicit a range of views one might not garner in individual interviews (Glesne, 2007). The interaction with other participants in the focus group setting can stimulate the expression of thoughts and ideas by subjects creating “a kind of ‘chaining’ or ‘cascading’ effect; talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions preceding it” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182). Phase Three made use of a focus group in an attempt to elicit qualitative data concerning current Rowan students’ views on the subject of SAT-optional admissions.

#### **Data collection**

Data in this phase was collected by conducting a focus group with a convenience sample of eight current Rowan University senior students on Thursday, August 26, 2010. A convenience sample is often utilized when a group of subjects are opportunely available to participate in a data collection session (Patten, 2001). The students were on campus a week before the fall semester began to attend a four-day Office of Admissions Student Ambassador training program. These students agreed to participate when a request was made during a meeting of all Ambassadors for student volunteers to take part in a focus group being conducted as part of an Educational Leadership doctoral study. A consent form was signed by each student (Appendix D). The focus group was held in an Education Hall classroom and lasted approximately 30



minutes. A predetermined interview protocol was followed (Appendix C). The session was tape-recorded. In an attempt to eliminate any bias that might be created by having the focus group conducted by this researcher (the Director of Admissions), another doctoral student facilitated the session and this researcher was not referred to during the session.

### **Qualitative data analysis**

Qualitative data analysis was utilized to organize and understand the data collected during the focus group session. As was the case in Phase One, I created typed transcripts of the interviews by listening to the recordings and typing all I could ascertain from the recording. I then went through the printed transcripts line by line, making handwritten notations about the 63 responses and their frequencies. I used these notations to create a typed data analysis outline. This outline was created based on my desire to search for response data groupings from the focus group conducive to answering the question of whether SAT scores should continue to be a required component of the freshman admission decision-making process at Rowan. Coding was then used to summarize and condense the data and to search for patterns in the responses (Saladaña, 2009).

### **Emergent Themes**

An analysis of the data in this research phase showed varied patterns of responses to the questions by the students. However, the analysis did lead to several emergent themes. In answer to the first question concerning the most important components of high school students' academic profile for predicting college success, a student's high school academic record was the most strongly supported answer by the focus group participants. Specific aspects of the academic record stressed by the students as being particularly important were the high school GPA; performance over the four years from freshman through senior year; and the growth and

development seen in a student's performance over those four years, with special emphasis on the performance during the junior and senior years. One participant said, "When you are getting closer to your junior and senior year, those grades are way more reflective of what kind of student you are going to be in college than when you first got there (high school)." Also, stressed by the participants was a student's involvement in extracurricular activities and the appearance of a good balance between schoolwork and activities outside the classroom. As one student put it, "Someone who just sits around and reads a book to learn stuff doesn't necessarily have what it takes to actually live a college career the right way." Perhaps, the most notable theme emerging from the focus group's answers to this question was the total absence of any mention of standardized test scores as an important component of a student's academic profile for predicting college success.

The participants in the focus group generally agreed that SAT scores should be given some weight in the admissions decision process, but should not be the most important factor considered. SAT scores were seen as a positive component of the admission decision process because they provide a uniform benchmark that can be used to compare applicants from varied locations and backgrounds, a "leveling ground" that can be used as a "tiebreaker," to make decisions between students with similar academic records vying for the admission slots. The participants cautioned, however, that good SAT scores can simply be reflective of being a good standardized test taker, rather than indicating strong learning content. It was also stressed that applicants for admission have many qualities that cannot be measured by an SAT test.

When asked in the third question how well their own SAT scores measured their ability to succeed academically at Rowan, the participants expressed skepticism about their individual SAT scores as an indication of their future success at the university. Several participants said

they had excellent grades in high school, mediocre SAT scores, but then excellent grades at Rowan. One participant stated, “You look at my SAT scores and you look at my GPA and you wouldn’t think it was the same student.” Once again, SAT scores were called simply a measurement of one’s ability to take standardized tests. It was pointed out the SAT prep courses do not teach those who enroll in these programs anything other than strategies aimed at successfully taking this type of test. It was termed “unfair” for SAT scores to be the deciding factor in a college admission decision. Also, in answer to this question, the stress surrounding the college entrance examination testing process became an emerging theme as the extreme stress caused by the testing process was mentioned by this focus group when a participant described how researching the average SAT scores of a college or university induced considerable stress before taking the SAT exam and later on when her scores were below the stated averages. As she lamented, “Academics were really easy for me, but when it came to the tests it was a big worry for me looking at colleges.”

The participants in this focus group had some unique insight into the fourth question regarding the public’s perception of SAT-optional admissions because they are Rowan Admissions Ambassadors who frequently interact with prospective students and their parents while providing campus tours, calling prospective students on behalf of the university, and chatting during open houses and other on-campus events. The participants said that students and parents frequently inquire about SAT-optional admissions and most seem as if they would welcome this choice if available. Once again stress was cited, in this case as a perceived reason why parents would welcome SAT-optional admissions since they often mention to the Ambassadors that they are very worried about their child’s SAT scores. As one participant described, “There’s always this super concerned mom who says your number (average SAT) is

this and my daughter only has this.” The notion of stress conveyed by this group echoed the finding from Phase One in which the Rowan assistant directors of admission cited the stress on both the students and parents surrounding the taking of the test and the prevailing belief that good students are kept out of Rowan by low SAT scores.

Another important emerging theme became apparent as a result of this student focus group when participants mentioned the belief that SAT-optional admissions could potentially lower Rowan’s esteem in the public eye. One participant stated she “did not take SAT-optional colleges as seriously” when doing the college search. There was also concern expressed about how Rowan’s academic quality would be perceived by the public compared to competing New Jersey public institutions who do not offer the SAT-optional choice. As one Ambassador wondered, “Will people ask what kind of program are they running over there?” This theme of potentially lowered public esteem as a result of SAT-optional admissions became more apparent as this study progressed.

When asked in question five what students would benefit most from changing to test-optional admissions, a response similar to that from the assistant directors in Phase One was given suggesting those high-quality students who have good grades with strong college preparatory courses, but who just do not score well on the SAT for a variety of reasons would enjoy the greatest benefit. It was pointed out that, in fact, many very good students do not even apply for admission to Rowan because they believe their scores are too low to be admitted. The group also suggested that applicants with significant extracurricular involvement might benefit if more emphasis was placed on other aspects of a student’s profile beyond SAT scores. However, as one participant cautioned, “You don’t get your degree for extracurricular activities, you get it for academics.”

The general consensus in response to the sixth question of what students might be negatively impacted by SAT-optional admissions was that no one would be hurt by such an option. It was said that good students with strong SATs will still submit their scores, as will not-so-good students with potential shown by strong SATs. The group felt the only students really negatively impacted in any way would be those who wasted their time and money taking expensive SAT prep courses when those scores may not be necessary.

### **Interpretations**

The following three major interpretations emerged from interpreting the focus group data: The eight focus group participants' consensus opinion was that a student's high school academic record; including grades, GPA, and class performance over the four years from freshman through senior year, is the best predictor of future college success. The fact that SAT scores were not even mentioned among the various answers provided by the group when asked what components of a student's academic profile are most important for predicting college success speaks volumes about their feelings on the importance of the SAT. As one participant said, "It's for all four years. Even if they have some time struggling, they do have time to build back up. It's kind of a long time, instead of just, you know, one time."

Secondly, the eight focus group participants all expressed the belief that their SAT scores were not an accurate measure of their potential to succeed academically at Rowan. Several cited their excellent grades in high school, mediocre SAT scores, but then excellent grades at Rowan. One student recalled how his SAT scores were barely high enough to get admitted to Rowan, but were, in fact, not high enough to be admitted to several other schools. "I have a 3.6 GPA here and you almost didn't take me," he said, "and many (other schools) wouldn't have me as their student because they chose an SAT over me."

Finally, the focus group participants agreed that most parents and students would welcome SAT-optional admissions at Rowan as it could relieve some of the stress involved in the application process, but several of the students expressed concern about a possible drop in the university's public academic esteem as result of such a change in policy. "You have this stigma that you give yourself by being SAT-optional," one cautioned.

### **Inference**

The interpretations of the data collected from the student focus group combine to suggest that this sample of Rowan students believe that test-optional freshman admissions is an idea with merit in their eyes.. The focus group participants expressed the belief that a high school student's academic record; including grades, GPA, and class performance over the four years from freshman through senior year, is the best predictor of future college success. Most notably, they did not even mention a student's SAT scores among the best predictors of college success. This emphasis on high school performance and not SAT scores coincides with the group's assertions that their own SAT scores were not accurate measures of their potential to succeed academically at Rowan. The focus group members also expressed the belief that prospective students, parents and guidance counselors would welcome SAT-optional admissions at Rowan. However, concern was expressed over how this would affect the institution's academic regard with the public.

### **Phase Three Conclusions**

Combining the three major interpretations drawn from the focus group data, one must infer that in the collective opinion of this sample of Rowan University senior students, a change to test-optional admissions has enough positive aspects to it to warrant consideration by university officials. However, the first major negative consideration found in this study, the

potential reduction in public esteem as a result of a change to SAT-optional admissions, was also introduced during this focus group.

#### **Phase Four**

Phase Four aimed to examine the perceptions of a purposive sample of Rowan faculty and administrators about the use of the SAT in freshman admissions at the university. The faculty and administrators in this sample were selected based on their involvement in the classroom and/or as academic advisors to freshman students at Rowan.

#### **Design and Procedure**

Qualitative research utilizes descriptive data, including interview transcripts and field notes and employs inductive data analysis that searches for meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The Phase Four of this study consisted of tape-recorded semi-structured interviews of three Rowan University faculty members and three academic advisors. Semi-structured interviews are recommended as a research format when the researcher has significant background in the topic being addressed (Morse and Richards, 2002). The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in conjunction with field notes made by the researcher during the process. The participants were asked to read and sign a consent form (Appendix A) and the interviews were conducted consisting of six open-ended questions listed in the interview protocol (Appendix E).

Semi-structured interviews allow participants to freely express their thoughts so that the researcher may search for varied themes in the data, yet asking the same questions consistently of each participant provides sufficient structure for comparison (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2006). The interviews were transcribed and the data coded and an analysis outlined created from the coding to make relevant themes more apparent to the researcher. Using these themes, inferences were derived from the data (Saladaña, 2009).

### **Data Collection**

I collected data by interviewing the three Rowan faculty members and three academic advisors. The faculty members included two Caucasian females and one African-American male, all with considerable experience teaching and advising freshman students. The academic advisors included one Caucasian female, one African-American female, and one Caucasian male. The primary advising counselees of these three participants are freshman students. In order to maintain confidentiality, no interview participants are identified by name.

The interviews were conducted in September and October of 2010 in the offices of the participants and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. The same questions were asked of all six participants. Typed transcripts of the interviews were created while listening to the recordings. The transcripts were printed out. I then went through the transcripts line by line, making notations about the responses and their frequencies (Saladaña, 2009). From these notations, I created a typed data analysis outline based on my desire to search for response data groupings pertinent to seeking an answer to the question of whether SAT scores should continue to be a required component of the freshman admission decision-making process at Rowan.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

According to Bogdan & Biklen (2007), data analysis involves the systematic organization of interview transcripts, researcher field notes, and other qualitative to enable the researcher to understand the data and report those findings. Qualitative data analysis was employed in Phase Four study as an appropriate means to gain an understanding data resulting from the interviews of the six participants. The data was categorized by question and descriptive pattern coding was used to identify emergent themes (Saladaña, 2009). An analysis of the data in Phase Four of this



study showed relatively consistent patterns of responses to the some questions posed, but some differing answers to others.

### **Emergent Themes**

The participants answered the first question concerning what they believe are the most important components of a high school student's academic profile for predicting college success in a fairly consistent manner. Each participant stressed the importance of utilizing a combination of factors in an effort to predict college success. Examining a student's high school course selection and grades in conjunction with SAT scores was rated the best method of predicting college success by all six participants. Also mentioned as factors to be considered were extracurricular activities, essays, interviews, and the competitiveness of a student's high school.

In response to the second question regarding how much weight SAT scores should be given in the admissions process at Rowan, the participants all said the SAT scores should not be given an extremely strong emphasis, but that the scores should carry some weight in the decision process. There were some slightly varying views on the amount of weight the SAT should be given. One of the faculty members stated, "I think they should be given at least a noticeable percentage. I don't know that I can put a number on it, but I don't really feel that good about having them be disregarded." One of the academic advisors did put a number on it, but qualified it saying, "I would say maybe 25 to 30%. However, I think if a student has an extremely high GPA and really good course selection, strong meaning they have three or more years of foreign language and they have 4 years of math, then I think the SAT should take a back seat." The other four participants all said they believed the SAT should carry "some" weight.

The third question posed to the professors and advisors asked, based on their experiences with students at Rowan, how well they believe SAT scores predict freshman academic success at

the university. A clear difference between the faculty members and advisors was apparent in the answers to this question. The faculty members all said they only occasionally looked at their students' SAT scores. One professor stated that she has looked at students' scores more often after they have had problems succeeding in courses to "see whether they were weak in some categories." The academic advisors, on the other hand, all stated that they regularly look at students SAT scores as part of the advisement process. All three advisors agreed that the scores are valid predictors of academic success only part of the time. However, two of the advisors noted opposite types of individuals who are exceptions to accurate SAT predictions of success. One said, "I think it's a fairly good predictor, but there are students that just don't test well that do well academically." The other advisor noted, "I'm actually surprised because some of my students who have the highest SAT's, meaning above 1200, are the ones who come in here and get C's their freshman year."

The fourth interview question asked what positive outcomes the participants believed would result from a change at Rowan to an SAT-optional admissions policy. One participant, an academic advisor, did not believe there would be any positive outcomes, saying, "Although I do not believe the SAT alone is a great assessment, it does give the institutional validity; especially because a large majority of higher education institutions utilize some kind of assessment." Four of the six participants predicted an increase in admissions applications as a positive outcome. One professor commented, "I think that it would encourage some students to apply who might not otherwise, meaning students that might be anxious about test taking." An advisor said, "You'll probably get more out-of-state applicants, I think it could be good for the pool because I think you're going to get people you've never had before. I think it would be a nice draw to bring people in with an SAT-optional from neighboring states." Another faculty member opined, "I

think it would be good to have a little more flexibility because we might get more diverse students, speaking in socio-economical terms, or in terms of race. Perhaps the most interesting answer to question four came from a third a faculty member who stated, “I think it might steer the institution in the direction of truly crafting a class in regards to . . . the other intangibles of college development and the college experience outside of the classroom. The non-academic things that also go into play with the college level student development, bringing in students who are civic-minded, bringing in students who are social justice-minded.”

Question five in the interviews asked what negative outcomes the participants believed could result from a change to SAT-optional admissions. Two of the participants, a professor and an advisor, stated the belief that there would be no negative outcomes. As the faculty member observed, “I don’t really see bad outcomes. I don’t think we would be swamped with non-qualified students. I really think that we would probably get much the same student body composition in terms of ability.” The potential negative outcomes that were suggested by the other four participants included a possible academically inferior change in the “student persona,” a negative impact on students’ “competitive sense,” and “grade inflation.” One professor, however, saw a potentially serious negative impact on the public prestige of the university. She stated, “I worry that at this stage of the game for Rowan that it wouldn’t be a good idea because I think our stature in the academic world is climbing and it could be a signal to the world that we’re not as serious about our applicant pool, that anyone can come here. I think that is actually not what we need to do. I think we need to raise our profile and whether we like the system or not, that is the system that we need to follow.”

The final query of the Rowan faculty and academic advisor interviews was simply to ask whether the participants had any other thoughts about the use of SAT scores in admissions. Two

participants, a faculty member and an advisor reiterated previous concerns about the effect of a change to an SAT-optional policy on Rowan University's public image. The faculty member said, "I think I would just say that, in general, I think they (SAT scores) have their place. We do want to have a student body here with high academic ability and I think SATs do show something ... I don't know if that would be a great move, in my opinion." In addition, the advisor cautioned, "The SAT is a staple of college admissions, like it or not."

The other four participants closed their interviews with more positive views on SAT-optional admissions. One faculty member summed her thoughts up saying, "I think they (SAT scores) are one useful measure, but I really hate to see too much placed on them and hate to see anyone ruled out because of them." An academic advisor stated, "When a student has high grades and high SAT's, they're going to be a good college student. The ones that scare me the most are the ones that have a really good SAT, but are mediocre high school students, because they're not going to apply themselves. I think a lot of college is just being persistent, showing up for class, taking your notes, doing your work, if you need help, getting academic services" Finally, the third faculty member summed his thoughts up with this:

"It could lead to a very dynamic type of student that graduates from this institution in the future, if handled properly and with great thought. And certainly with any transition, people are going to find negatives and positive with it, but I do believe that with a test-optional policy that would lead me to believe that those that need that kind of validation would still do that and use that as a means for showing their worth for being here. Those who don't would have the option of showing their worth in other ways and expressing that. So, certainly with it being optional it would give us the opportunity to find some

diamonds in the rough and still be able to let those people shine who already shine, and still be able to let them shine even brighter.”

### **Interpretations**

Analyzing the emergent themes in Phase Four produced several obvious interpretations. To begin, it was clear that all six participants believed attempting to predict college success from a high school student’s academic profile should include an examination of a combination of factors including course selection, grades, SAT scores, and other ingredients like extracurricular activities, essays, high school’s competitiveness, and interviews. The participants agreed that SAT scores could play a role in the admissions process, but should not be over-emphasized. As one faculty member put it, “SAT’s do predict academic ability and I think they should be part of it. But it’s not the “be all end all.”

The faculty members interviewed in Phase Four admitted to only occasionally checking students’ standardized test scores, while the academic advisors said they use the scores as an integral part of the advising process. All three advisors stated that, based on their experiences, the SAT is only a valid predictor of academic success some of the time. As one advisor lamented, “Is it a predictor? Sure, probably for some students, but I’m most disappointed when I see the “high SAT” students struggling, and then I wish I could go back and see their high school record because I’m wondering what courses they took in high school to prepare them to be here.”

Just as was the case with the Rowan admissions officers interviewed in Phase One, the majority of the participants interviewed in Phase Four saw an increase in freshman applications as the most probable positive outcome of a change to an SAT-optional admissions policy, citing potential increases in out-of-state applicants and in the diversity of the applicant pool.

The greatest potential negative outcome of a change to an SAT-optional admissions policy expressed in the Rowan faculty/academic advisor interview data in Phase Four was the same one found in the Rowan student focus group data from Phase One; that being a possible loss of academic prestige in the eyes of the public at a time when that prestige is on the rise.

Four of the six participants in the Phase Four interviews summed up their feelings with very positive statements about SAT-optional admissions. One academic advisor gave SAT-optional admissions a very strong endorsement, exclaiming, “I think “it’s optional” is a good way to go!” However, two of the participants felt it necessary to reiterate their question five responses in response to question six, again expressing their concern about a potential reduction in public prestige if the current SAT-required policy was altered. An academic advisor warned, “Test-optional gives the appearance that institution does not care about test scores, which can lead down a slippery slope. Depending on the situation, these schools can be seen in a negative light.”

### **Inference**

The interpretations of the data collected in Phase Four of this study produced showed that the sample of faculty and academic advisors interviewed maintain some mixed views on the use of the SAT in freshman admissions at Rowan and the possibility of test-optional admissions. The prevailing view of the participants was that a combination of factors should be examined when considering a high school student for admission to Rowan University and that, although SAT scores might be part of that combination, the scores should not be over-emphasized relative to other factors like course selection, grades, and extracurricular involvement. The three academic advisors, who look at students’ SAT scores much more often than the faculty members, all agreed that the scores predicted students’ academic success only some of the time.

All the six subjects interviewed in Phase Four felt a change to SAT-optional admissions would result in an increased number of freshman applications to the institution. In general, four of the six subjects gave SAT-optional admissions a positive endorsement. The two that did not seem to endorse the idea of SAT-optional admissions based their opinions primarily on a strong concern about the potential negative effect of a test-optional policy on the university's perceived public prestige.

### **Phase Four Conclusions**

The interviews with three Rowan University faculty members and academic advisors in this phase of this study showed that these members of the university community hold somewhat mixed views on the subject of a potential change to an SAT-optional admissions policy.

Although the majority of this group expressed a positive view of the potential for SAT-optional admissions at Rowan, they still maintained the belief that SAT scores are, in general, a useful component within the general mix of factors that should be used when judging a high school applicant for admission. However, perhaps the most important conclusion gleaned from an analysis of the qualitative data in Phase Four is that some members of the university community, like some of the students in Phase Three of this study, possess a level of trepidation concerning how a change to SAT-optional admissions might negatively impact the general public's view of the academic quality of the university.

### **Phase Five**

Patten (2001) says there are several advantages to using questionnaire research. Questionnaires can be administered simultaneously to large numbers of subjects and usually provides response data that is relatively easy to tabulate and analyze. Questionnaires also have the advantage of easily allowing respondents to remain anonymous, thus encouraging

truthfulness in answering often not found in other methods of research wherein the subjects do not remain anonymous (Patten, 2001). Survey research is a type of questionnaire research aimed at providing a quantitative description of the opinions and attitudes of a sample of a population in order to make inferences about the opinions and attitudes of that population (Creswell, 2009). Phase Five of this study made use of an online survey in an attempt to elicit data concerning the views of New Jersey high school guidance counselors on the general subject of SAT-optional admissions and the specific subject of a potential change in policy to SAT-optional admissions at Rowan University.

### **Design and Procedure**

The survey employed in Phase Five was developed in an electronic format utilizing the online tool [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). The advantages of using on-line surveys “include access to individuals in distant locations, the ability to reach difficult to contact participants, and the convenience of having automated data collection, which reduces researcher time and effort (Wright, 2005).” Prior to implementation, the survey was field tested on a convenience sample of coworkers (Patten, 2001). The survey (see Appendix G) consisted of seven open-ended questions. With the use of Microsoft Excel 2007, a comparative quantitative analysis of the data collected in the survey was created. A descriptive analysis of the themes inherent in the quantitative analysis was then created using qualitative coding methods (Saladaña, 2009).

### **Data Collection**

Data in Phase Five was collected by sending via email an invitation (Appendix F) to participate in the study to 770 high school guidance counselors in the state of New Jersey. The guidance counselors’ names and email addresses were provided at the researcher’s request by the New Jersey Association of College Admission Counseling (NJACAC), an organization of which



the researcher is a member. NJACAC is a statewide organization of higher education and high school personnel involved in the college admissions process. The information was provided to the researcher in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The list of guidance counselors included those from public, private, and parochial schools throughout New Jersey. The invitation explained that I was conducting a research study to determine whether to recommend that Rowan consider making standardized test scores an optional component of freshman admission. The invitation said I would collect and analyze qualitative data on participant perceptions and concerns regarding the current use of standardized tests in admissions and a potential change in policy to test-optional freshman admission. The invitation assured the invitees that all responses would be kept confidential and not be linked to them personally or their institution. The guidance counselors were asked to participate by clicking on a link to [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).

The invitation was sent to all guidance counselors on the list via a mass email on November 10, 2010. All addressees were blind-copied so no other email addresses were visible other than mine and their own. A response deadline was set at November 24, 2010. A total of 129 New Jersey high school guidance counselors accessed and completed by the deadline. This was a response rate of 16.7%.

### **Data Analysis**

Microsoft Excel 2007 was used to form a comparative quantitative analysis of the responses to the seven open-ended questions in the survey. The researcher then interpreted the data employing pattern coding to determine themes, interpretations, and inferences (Saladaña, 2009). Table 2 shows a summary of the guidance counselor survey responses grouped by like responses and the percentage of all respondents to the question who provided a similar response. The respondents frequently provided more than one answer to a given open-ended question.

Table 2  
*Guidance Counselor Survey Results*

Question	n	Answers	% of Respondents
1. What do you think are the most important components of a high school student's academic profile for predicting college success?	129	Academic improvement	10%
		Course selection	72%
		Grades (GPA)	65%
		SAT/ACT	9%
		Recommendations	7%
		Extracurricular	7%
		Interviews	1%
		Essay	1%
		Class Rank	4%
		Transcript	14%
		Jr. year grades	1%
HS Reputation	3%		
2. How much weight should SAT scores be given in freshman admissions decisions?	129	High	5%
		40%	3%
		30%	2%
		25%	5%
		20%	7%
		10%	2%
		Some	33%
		Minimal	29%
		Should not be used	5%
3. How do you perceive the public's (potential students, parents, guidance counselors, etc.) view of test-optional admissions?	129	Don't know	1%
		Bad test takers welcome, good don't	9%
		Positive	52%
		Mixed	10%
		Negative connotation (easy)	9%
		Gives impression of fairness	4%
		Good students don't choose it	1%
		Skeptical	9%
		Confused	5%
		Unaware	7%
4. What positive outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from a college or university changing to test-optional freshman admissions?	129	Increase in applications	26%
		More options for good students w/lower scores	40%
		Less stress	10%
		Can look at whole student (holistic evaluation)	9%
		Little or none	5%
Increased diversity	9%		

*Table 2 continues*

Table 2 continued

		Level playing field	1%
		Unsure	2%
		May increase student focus on courses/grades	5%
		More accurate evaluations	10%
		Good PR	2%
		Cost savings for families	2%
5. What negative outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from a college or university changing to test-optional freshman admissions?	129	None	29%
		Less informed decisions	16%
		Possible lessening of prestige	15%
		More time needed to review applications	12%
		Less money for College Board	3%
		Potentially diluted application pool	11%
		Students may not take test seriously	2%
		Standardized tests should be required	3%
6. What students, if any, do you believe would benefit from changing to test-optional freshman admissions at Rowan?	126	Good students with lower SAT/ACT scores	56%
		Those with test anxiety	17%
		LD students	9%
		Those who can't afford prep courses	12%
		Minorities	10%
		Underprivileged– low SES	10%
		Out-of-state	1%
		From less competitive HS	2%
		Without SAT	1%
		All Students	2%
		Few or None	5%
		First-generation college	2%
7. What students, if any, do you believe would be negatively impacted by changing to test-optional freshman admissions at Rowan?	122	Few or None	36%
		High scores – lower performance	14%
		Highly competitive students who are turned off	2%
		Unsure	4%
		Students from very competitive HS	1%
		Average students	2%
		Other state colleges	1%
		Increased apps – more competition	1%
		Students who don't understand optional process	1%
		Scholarship seekers	1%
		White suburban students	1%

Note. n = number of respondents

### **Emergent Themes**

An analysis of the data in Phase Five showed varied patterns of responses from the guidance counselors across New Jersey to the seven open-ended questions. However, the qualitative analysis of the responses did provide several emergent themes. In answer to the first question concerning the most important components of high school student's' academic profile for predicting college success, a student's high school academic record was the most strongly supported answer by the guidance counselors. Specific aspects of the academic record stressed by the respondents as being particularly important were a student's course selection (72% of the respondents) and high school GPA (65%). 10% of the guidance counselors pointed to the high school transcript as a whole as being most important. Answers included "strength of schedule and GPA," "GPA and course selection," "academic record and rigor of courses taken," "grades based on the students' rigor of schedule," and "grades, especially in challenging courses." The most salient emergent theme emerging from the responses to this question as it pertains to this study was that only 9% of the guidance counselors rated SAT/ACT scores as the most important component of a high school student's academic profile for predicting future college success.

The responses to the second question asking how much weight the SAT should be given in the admissions process showed the guidance counselors generally believed the SAT should be given some weight in the process, however only 5% of the respondents said the weight of the SAT should be high. 29% of the guidance counselors who completed the survey said the weight of the SAT should be minimal, while 33% simply replied "some. Comments from the counselors included "very little because it doesn't measure motivation and determination," "a consideration but not the end-all-be-all," "too much weight is given to it," "they need to be considered but I believe they should be at the lower end," "very little for standard admission," "probably less than

is the case at some schools,” and “transfer admissions at most reputable institutions rely on college course GPA all most exclusively and it should be the same with high school course GPA.

Smith (2009) says it is important for guidance counselors to have significant involvement with parents and students during the students’ transition from high school to higher education. As a result, the participants in this survey should have some significant insight into the third question regarding the public’s view of SAT-optional admissions. The majority (52%) of the guidance counselors responding said they perceived the view of parents, students, and others regarding test-optional college admissions to be positive. Comments offered included “welcomed and favorable,” “they will welcome it with open arms,” “I think they like it and think it is a good thing,” “fair and just,” and “they love it.” Only 7% perceived the public’s view as negative, while 9% rated the public’s view as skeptical. As has been opined by other participants in previous stages of this study, the belief that test-optional admissions could potentially lower the prestige of the institution in the public’s eye was noted again here. Comments made included “such colleges are viewed as less competitive schools,” “people might perceive it as lowering standards,” and “the public is too programmed into SAT/ACT scores.”

The suggested potential positive outcomes for an institution changing to test-optional admissions in response to the fourth question in the survey included: an increase in applications (26%), more options for good students with lower SAT scores (40%), more accurate admissions decisions (10%), and an increase in diversity (9%). Such comments as “a wider selection of prospective students,” “you would get a clearer picture of the student’s potential success in college,” “decisions could be based on a whole student,” and “more interesting, diverse, and balanced student population” were made.

The fifth survey question asked what negative outcomes the participants though might

result from a college or university changing to test-optional freshman admissions. The most frequent response (29%) by the guidance counselors was that there would be no negative outcomes. The potential negative outcomes that were suggested included: less-informed admission decisions (16%), possible lessening of public prestige (15%), more time required to review applications (12%) and a potential diluting of the quality of the institution's applicant pool (11%). Some of the comments made by the respondents to this question included "it would limit the number of variables or predictors of future success," "uninformed people think that it represents a school moving towards being less selective," "it might encourage students who are less qualified to apply," "none if done correctly," and "none, zero, zip, nada!"

The survey's sixth question asked what students the participants felt could benefit from a change to test-optional admissions at Rowan University. The most frequently expressed response echoed the most frequently expressed response to the fourth question about potential positive outcomes from such a change in policy. A clear majority of the respondents (56%) said good students with lower SAT/ACT scores would benefit most from this change. Comments such as "some of my best and brightest students do not do well on the SAT," "students who are academically solid, but poor test-takers," and "over-achievers who get stellar grades, but so-so SAT scores" were made. Other responses included: students with test anxiety (17%), minority students (10%), and underprivileged students (10%). Respondents commented "the excellent student with test anxiety," "students who are sincerely stressed by so much riding on a test," "minority kids," "urban and blue collar students," and "first-generation, low socio-economic students."

The final question of this on-line survey of high school guidance counselors asked what students might be negatively impacted by a change to a test-optional admissions policy at Rowan. 36% of those replying said few or none. Some of the comments here were “none I know of,” “no negative impact,” and “I don’t see any logical reason any student would be negatively impacted.” The second most frequent response to this question pointed to students with high test scores, but low academic performance. This response was given by 14% of the participants. They made comments like “students who do not perform well in the classroom, but test well,” “naturally smart students who slack off in high school,” and “the student who expected the SAT would get them into college.

### **Interpretations**

Examining the themes emerging from the data collected in the on-line survey of New Jersey high school guidance counselors in Phase Five of this project produced several clear interpretations. First, the guidance counselors showed a notable preference for high school course selection and grades as the most important components of a high school student’s academic profile for predicting college success. Just as notable was the relatively low number of counselors who said SAT scores were the most important factor. A coinciding theme was that a large majority of the respondents said that SAT scores should carry only minimal or “some” weight in the college admission process, while only a small number said the weight of the SAT should be high.

Over half of the guidance counselors who responded to the survey said they believed the public’s view of test-optional admissions was positive, although nearly a fifth of them rated the public’s view as negative or skeptical. Once again the concern about a resultant reduction in an

institution's perceived academic prestige by the public was voiced here. This, of course, has been reoccurring theme throughout several phases of this study.

The most frequent potential positive outcomes suggested by the guidance counselors for a college or university changing to a test-optional freshman admissions policy included an increase in higher education options for good high school students with lower standardized test scores and a probable increase in admission applications for an institution making this policy change. The most frequent response from the guidance counselors about potential negative outcomes for a college or university changing to a test-optional freshman admissions policy was that there would be no negative outcomes. However, from the potential negative outcomes that were suggested, the most frequent responses included less-informed admission decisions, more time required for admission officers to review applications, a potential dilution of the applicant pool quality, and, once again, a possible lowering of an institution's perceived academic prestige as a result of moving to test-optional admissions.

Finally, from the answers to the final two survey questions asking what students might benefit from and what students might be negatively impacted by Rowan moving to a test-optional admissions policy, the majority of the guidance counselors said that academically successful students with lower level test scores would benefit most. A fifth of the counselors also mentioned either minority students or lower socio-economic level students as one who could potentially benefit. The most frequently expressed opinion about what students might be negatively impacted by this change in policy was that few or none would be affected negatively, although students with relatively lower academic performance, but high test scores, were mentioned fairly often by the counselors.



### **Inference**

The interpretations of the data collected Phase Five combine to strongly suggest that the high school guidance counselors of New Jersey believe SAT-optional admissions should at least be a topic of future consideration at Rowan University. The responses to the survey in Phase Five lead show that guidance counselors believe high school courses and grades are a better predictor of successful college performance than SAT scores. The responses to the survey also show that guidance counselors believe SAT scores should not be given a high amount of weight in college admissions decisions.

The responses to the survey show that the majority of guidance counselors believe the public (students, parents, and others) holds a positive view of SAT-optional admissions. In addition, the responses show that the guidance counselors believe the potential positive outcomes from an institution moving to test-optional admissions greatly outweigh the potential negative outcomes. Also, the counselors believe a change by Rowan to test-optional admissions would benefit more of their high school students than it would negatively impact.

### **Phase Five Conclusions**

Combining the major themes drawn from the data, one must infer that the majority of high school guidance counselors in the state of New Jersey believe there are more potential positive features to test-optional admissions in general than negative ones. One must also infer that the state's guidance counselors feel a potential change of the Rowan admissions policy to test-optional freshman admissions has enough potential positive aspects to it to warrant strong consideration by the university.

## **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. I recognize that qualitative research is not entirely value-free and the process of interpreting the data on a topic I am very familiar with undoubtedly includes some subjective bias on my part. It is important for a researcher to reflect upon his or her own subjectivity and its potential influence on one's research (Glesne, 2006). In an attempt to maintain awareness of this subjectivity, self-reflective journal notes examining my possible biases were maintained throughout the course of the study. I also must consider the bias that could potentially have existed when interviewing professional colleagues on the Rowan campus, particularly those who report directly to me, whose participation could potentially be tainted by a conscious or subconscious attempt to provide the responses they feel might please me. Every attempt was made to assure that any employee/employer relationship that may have existed between a participant in this study and this researcher would not be affected in any way by participating or declining to participate.

## **Summary**

The findings in this research study were based on quantitative data and, primarily, on qualitative data derived from the interviews and surveys of Rowan University faculty, advisors, students and the high school guidance counselors of New Jersey. Collecting, examining, coding, and analyzing this data was a painstaking process done over the course of an entire year. The themes, interpretations, inferences, and conclusions drawn from the data in the five phases of this project combined to create a general impression of the current status of the use of SAT scores in the admission process at Rowan and the views of the participants about a potential change to an SAT-optional policy.

On the ensuing pages, Chapter V will review the findings of the five phases of this study. The success of this research project will be discussed as conclusions and answers to the study's stated research questions will be formed. This will include a discussion of this researcher's espoused leadership theory as examining one's leadership qualities and beliefs are an important part of any research study submitted to the Educational Leadership department in the College of Education at Rowan University.

## Chapter V: Conclusions and Reflections on My Leadership

The aim of this mixed methods research project was to determine whether the SAT should continue to be a required component of the admissions process for freshman applicants to Rowan University and to examine the potential for SAT-optional admissions at the institution. A survey of relevant literature suggested that, because of the many doubts about and criticisms of the use of standardized test scores in college admissions, the existing SAT-required policy should be examined to determine if it still remains relevant and appropriate. In an attempt to explore this topic, the following three questions were posed:

- Are SAT scores a valid predictor of freshman success at Rowan University?
- In what ways does the study indicate that the SAT should or should not be a required component of the admissions process for freshman applicants to Rowan University?
- How will addressing the current use of the SAT in the admissions process and any potential changes in that use impact my leadership in the Office of Admissions, throughout the university, and the development of my overall leadership qualities and abilities in all situations?

According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), “Answering questions that have interconnected qualitative and quantitative features . . . should lead to final conclusions or explanations that then lead to interrelated quantitative and qualitative inferences (p. 133).” A discussion of the answers to the three research questions derived from the findings in this study will provide evidence of the level of success this project achieved.

### **Are SAT scores a valid predictor of freshman success at Rowan University?**

The qualitative research data collected from interviews with admissions officers, faculty, and academic advisors at Rowan University, along with a focus group done with current Rowan students, showed a generally skeptical view of the ability of SAT scores to accurately predict freshman academic success at the university.

Phase One of this research study consisted of interviews with four assistant directors of admission at Rowan. The assistant directors evaluate and make the admission decisions on the majority of freshman applications to the university. All four of these experienced admissions officers expressed extreme doubts about the validity of the SAT for predicting freshman success at Rowan and all four felt high school courses and grades were much more reliable predictors of future success. The current Rowan students taking part in the focus group in Phase Three voiced similar views about the inadequacy of SAT scores for predicting academic success. Several examples of their own individual success in at the university despite relatively low SAT scores were cited by these students.

The faculty and academic advisors interviewed in Phase Four offered somewhat mixed opinions of the validity of SAT scores for predicting freshman success. Several of these participants voiced the opinion that SAT scores accurately predicted academic success at least some of the time, but the prevailing view of the interviewees was that SAT scores should not be over-emphasized relative to other factors such as high school grades and course selection.

Phase Two, the quantitative portion of this mixed methods study describes the consistent results obtained from two statistical analyses of the relationship between students' SAT scores and freshman GPA at Rowan and students' high school GPA and freshman GPA at the university for two recent incoming freshman classes. The same correlations were found in the

analyses of the fall 2007 and fall 2008 freshman classes at Rowan despite their differing class sizes. These analyses showed the correlation between the students' combined Critical Reading and Math SAT score and their freshman year GPA and was moderate. However, the analyses also showed the correlation between the students' high school GPA and freshman year GPA was strong. Based on this statistical evidence, in answer to the question of whether the SAT is a valid predictor success at Rowan, one must conclude that the SAT scores alone of freshman students accepted for admission to Rowan are only moderate predictors of freshman year academic success at the institution. On the other hand, one must conclude that the students' high school grade point averages are much better predictors of freshman success. Consequently, the most important conclusion one must draw from this quantitative data relative to the principal topic of this research study is that, based on the data from two recent freshman classes, if SAT scores were not used in evaluating some students for admission because submission of SAT scores was optional, the use of high school GPAs alone in the process would still provide a more reliable predictor of future freshman success.

**In what ways does the study indicate that the SAT should or should not be a required component of the admissions process for freshman applicants to Rowan University?**

This study employed a convergent parallel design mixed methods design that gathered data using both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In an attempt to best organize and makes sense of the various findings from this study's five phases, the author made use of a data assessment technique called Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis to answer this research question. SWOT analysis is a tool used for analyzing complex situations by reducing the amount of available information into a logical order to facilitate concise understanding and actionable decision-making (Coman & Ronen,

2009). Chiefly because of its simplicity, SWOT analysis enjoys pervasive use in business and industry. SWOT analysis is increasingly utilized in education and the use of SWOT analysis is now widespread in the academic peer-reviewed literature (Helms & Nixon, 2010).

### **SWOT analysis**

A SWOT analysis is usually presented in the form of a grid consisting of four quadrants with the four SWOT headings: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Strengths and weaknesses are usually related to the internal environment. Opportunities and threats usually pertain to the external environment. By listing the positive and negative internal and external issues in the four quadrants, one can more easily make decisions about a given question or problem (Herman, 1993).

Figure 1 contains a SWOT analysis of the ways this study indicates that the SAT should or should not be a required component of the admissions process at Rowan University.

**Figure 1. SWOT Analysis of the potential for SAT-Optional Admissions at Rowan**

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admissions staff, students, and guidance counselors express strong support</li> <li>• Faculty/advisors mostly support</li> <li>• Quantitative data lends support</li> <li>• Admissions staff, students, and guidance counselors believe public would welcome</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer factors to base admissions decisions on</li> <li>• SATs provide a uniform benchmark for all applicants</li> <li>• More time and resources may be needed to evaluate applications</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admissions staff, students, guidance counselors, and faculty/advisors believe increased applications would result</li> <li>• Admissions staff, students, guidance counselors, and faculty/advisors believe many strong students with low SATs would benefit</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students, guidance counselors, and faculty/advisors express concern about possible lowering of Rowan's perceived public academic prestige</li> </ul>

The SWOT analysis based on the findings of this research study shows the strengths of a potential change in the freshman admissions policy at Rowan to SAT-optional to include: the strong support of the assistant directors of admissions, current Rowan students, and New Jersey guidance counselors; the general support of the faculty and advisors; the fact that the ACES reports show high school GPA to be a stronger predictor of academic success than SATs; and the beliefs of the assistant directors of admission, the Rowan students, and the New Jersey guidance counselors that the public would welcome a change in policy to SAT-optional admissions at Rowan.

The SWOT analysis based on the findings of this research study shows the weaknesses of a potential change in the freshman admissions policy at Rowan to SAT-optional to include: the absence of SAT scores would mean fewer factors available to base admissions decisions on for some applicants; SATs provide a uniform benchmark to compare all applicants to the institution; and more time and resources may be needed to evaluate applications without SAT scores.

The SWOT analysis based on the findings of this research study shows the opportunities of a potential change in the freshman admissions policy at Rowan to SAT-optional to include: the assistant directors of admissions, current Rowan students, New Jersey guidance counselors, and Rowan faculty advisors all believe an increase in freshman applications would result from such a change in policy; and the assistant directors of admissions, current Rowan students, New Jersey guidance counselors, and Rowan faculty advisors also all believe a change to SAT-optional admissions would provide a chance for a Rowan education for many academically superior students burdened with lower SAT scores.

Finally, the SWOT analysis based on the findings of this research study shows the main threat of a potential change in the freshman admissions policy at Rowan to SAT-optional to be



that the current Rowan students, New Jersey guidance counselors, and Rowan faculty/advisors all expressed concerns that a change to an SAT-optional freshman admissions policy could possibly lead to a lowering of the perceived academic prestige of the university in the public's eye.

### **Discussion**

The opportunities found in the above SWOT analysis appear to be reinforced in the literature. Robinson and Monks (2005) described the positives and negatives of changing to SAT-optional admissions for over 700 colleges and universities who had made that change in policy. The authors say an increase in applications is likely following a change to SAT-optional admissions. Gilroy (2007) says Drew University in New Jersey reported a 20 percent increase in applications the first year following a change to SAT-optional and an increase in accepted student GPAs from 3.40 to 3.44. Knox College in Illinois also saw a 20 percent increase in applications after going SAT-optional. Robinson and Monks (2005) say such an increase in applications benefits an institution in several ways. First, the additional applicants often contain students with desirable qualities that the institution might not otherwise attract including “minority students and students with outstanding academic characteristics other than SAT scores (p.394).” For example, Knox College admitted its most diverse class ever, consisting of 25 percent minority students and 20 percent first generation college attendees, the first year after switching to an SAT-optional policy (Gilroy, 2007).

Secondly, Robinson and Monks (2005) say institutions often appear to become instantly more selective to the public by going SAT-optional as their acceptance rate lowers when they select the same number of students from more applications. A third benefit according to Robinson and Monks is that a change to an SAT-optional policy often results in a higher average

SAT, thus, making the institutions appear more selective, of higher quality, and “bolster their positions in influential rankings such as the *US News and World Report* rankings of colleges (p. 394).” These last two points, of course, runs counter to the SWOT analysis threat concerning a potential lowering of public academic prestige.

Robinson and Monks say a potential negative of a change to SAT-optional admissions is that because admissions personnel no longer have SAT scores to differentiate between students there is a tendency for some admissions officers to “respond by assuming that all non-submitters are “lemons” and not admitting many of the students who withhold their SAT scores (p. 394).” This, of course, echoes the SWOT analysis weaknesses of losing the uniform benchmark of SAT scores and having fewer factors on which to base admissions decisions. These weaknesses of SAT-optional admissions also suggest the need for considering other methods of determining what applicants should be admitted to Rowan University. One possibility is the use of noncognitive assessment tests. Noncognitive refers to measuring variables relating to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions instead of the traditional verbal and quantitative variables measured by the SAT test (Sedlacek, 1996). Sedlacek says noncognitive variables are especially important to look at for minority, low SES, and other non-traditional students because standardized tests may provide a limited view of their potential. One such potential tool, the Steinberg Triarchic Abilities Test (STAT), designed to measure “success intelligence” (Steinberg, 2004), was mentioned earlier in this study. Sedlacek has developed the Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) which is designed to assess noncognitive variables such as “positive self-concept,” “realistic self-appraisal,” “successful leadership experience,” “demonstrated community service,” and “knowledge acquired in or about a field.” (Sedlacek, 1996). Oregon State University (OSU) now utilizes the Sedlacek NCQ for its admissions decisions. The OSU

admissions application contains six short- answer NCQ questions that are designed to assess Sedlacek's eight noncognitive variables. The NCQ is now used at OSU not only for admissions, but for academic advising, student services, financial aid, and by the faculty to aid teaching. Since it began utilizing the NCQ diversity, retention and freshman GPAs have all significantly improved at OSU (Sedlacek, 2010).

### **Recommendation**

In conclusion, it is obvious that weighing the pros and cons of such a major change in policy at an institution is difficult and despite any recommendation from this study a potential move to SAT-optional admissions would have to be researched and debated by many constituents of the university. However, it would appear to this researcher from the findings of this study that the strengths and opportunities of a potential SAT-optional admissions policy at Rowan significantly outweigh its weaknesses and threats. Given the probability of increasing enrollment in the near future and especially given the NACAC recommendation encouraging "institutions to consider dropping the admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test or the admission policies of the institution ... support the decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising, or research (p.7)," it would seem appropriate that Rowan University take a very close look at the possibility of becoming the first public institution in the state of New Jersey to offer SAT-optional admissions.

### **Suggestions for further research**

There is obviously room for much more research on the topic of the potential for SAT-optional admissions at Rowan University. The author suggests the following possibilities:

1. Examine the historical data of one or more incoming Rowan freshman classes beyond their freshman year through their entire enrollment to find the correlations between SAT scores and retention, four-year academic success, and persistence to graduation.
2. Examine any differences in the academic success of students submitting SAT scores and ACT scores for admission to Rowan. This becomes more important as the percentage of students submitting the ACT has seen a recent dramatic increase.
3. Examine the historical data to compare any differences in academic success at Rowan between freshman students admitted on the basis of their SAT scores and transfer students who, because they had more than 24 college credits completed when applying for admission, were not required to submit SAT scores.
4. If the university wishes to consider an SAT-optional policy it may want to conduct a pilot study by allowing a group of students, perhaps those in particular majors, the opportunity of test-optional admissions and then compare the freshman year success of those who submitted scores and those who did not.

**How will addressing the current use of the SAT in the admissions process and any potential changes in that use impact my leadership in the Office of Admissions, throughout the university, and the development of my overall leadership qualities and abilities in all situations?**

Although the pertinent topic addressed in this research study was the use of SAT scores in the freshman admissions process at Rowan University, the project also served as an excellent vehicle for this researcher to make use of the knowledge I have gained as a student in the Educational Leadership doctoral program. Most importantly, it presented a wonderful

opportunity for me to demonstrate my understanding of leadership theory and to reflect deeply upon my own espoused theory of leadership. Throughout the five phases of this study my personal thoughts on my leadership beliefs were captured through journaling and field notes. Continuous personal reflection throughout the process enabled me to perceive, learn, adjust, and refine my personal leadership ideals, particularly in reference to leading change. Based on the important role learning about leadership played in this study, I believe it is appropriate to include a detailed summary of the espoused theory of leadership I am now able to articulate.

### **Introduction to My Espoused Theory of Leadership**

Developing and explaining one's personal leadership theory requires a great deal of self-examination and reflection. Reflection can be a daunting task and, according to Conger (1990), many leaders avoid it because they fear it may challenge the positive perceptions they have developed of themselves. Leaders must have the courage to take the time to engage in genuine personal reflection, not only about who they are as a person and as a leader, but also about the structure and goals of their organization and the many different types of personalities that make up that organization. Reflection involves observation, dialogue, reading, listening, some data analysis, and, most importantly, thinking. Rodgers (2002) says reflection takes time to do well, and it is clear one must make a serious commitment to oneself to set aside time for uninterrupted reflective time with one's own mind. "The value of an experience lies in the perception of relationships or continuities to which it leads us" (Dewey, 1916, p.140) and when I took the time to seriously reflect upon the experiences of my life, I was able to clearly see the long path that led me to where I am today. Although the path was rather convoluted, I believe critical reflection on my life has allowed me to understand how I came to be the person I now am and the leader I hope to be.

**Reflection: The Path to Who I Am**

I was born and raised in Indiana, Pennsylvania, a small town in the western part of the state, smack in the middle of the bituminous coal mining region. My mother was from an even smaller town just outside Indiana. She was one of eighteen children. Her father was a coal miner. She had eleven brothers and they all became coal miners and, of course, most of the seven daughters married men who crawled around underground for a living, too. A large percentage of the males among my seventy-five first cousins on my mother's side also ended up being coal miners. To my knowledge, I was the first among all those cousins to attend college and only a handful of the youngest ones did so after me.

My father somehow managed to stay out of the mines. He instead worked at the other end of the process. All that coal was dug out for one main purpose and that's where my father was employed. He was a steelworker. My dad worked rotating shifts in the mills for forty years. He and my mother were good people who worked hard (my mother in a storm window factory). Our family of seven, which included my four younger sisters, lived what I would term a lower middle-class existence.

When I look back on my youth I realize I grew up without any real ambition. This was the case despite the fact that from first grade on I was always one of the smartest kids in my class. I have a vivid memory of my neighbor, who was in high school at the time, handing me a book when I was probably six years old and telling her friend to listen to how well I could read. I was in gifted classes in junior high and had the highest SAT scores in my senior class, although my grades were very uneven depending on whether or not a subject interested me. Honestly, however, I don't think I ever really seriously thought about any sort of successful career goal. When I reflect back on this now it's obvious to me that this lack of ambition was a direct result

of who my parents were and where they came from. It just never occurred to them that their child could ever become a lawyer, a doctor, or a scientist. That was the sort of thing that a different class of people did. They certainly never discouraged me in any way, but because they had no concept of the possibility, they never encouraged me either.

Although Indiana, PA was in the mining and steelmaking region, in retrospect I was very fortunate that it was also something else. It was a college town. The resident population when I grew up there was around 20,000 people. The enrollment at Indiana University of Pennsylvania at that time was close to 17,000 students. What would have otherwise been a typical small, close-minded, somewhat isolated western Pennsylvania blue collar town had a completely different character than its neighboring burghs due to the presence of the largest institution in the Pennsylvania state higher education system.

Even though I never gave much thought to what I wanted to do with my life, I always knew I was going to go to college. Our house was two blocks from the IUP campus and I was surrounded by the college environment my entire life. I learned to ride a bike on that campus and my friends and I often played there as kids. By the time we were seniors in high school we were already attending fraternity parties. I wasn't planning to attend college because I wanted to get a degree and do something with my life. I wanted to go to college because I knew it would be so much fun.

I did attend IUP and I did have fun. I started out as an English major with some vague consideration of becoming a writer, but I just wasn't that interested in reading all the literature and poetry that was required. I eventually changed my major to psychology because I found the psych courses I had taken intriguing. Just like high school, my grades were all over the place depending on my interest level at a given time. I had several Dean's List semesters intermixed

with couple 1.5 GPA semesters. However, I was always at the top of the class when it came to partying and having fun.

I was still close to 20 credits short of graduation after four years of nonstop fun, yet still no closer to having any clue what I wanted to do with my life. Most of my friends, however, were graduating and moving away. At this point I decided to leave school for awhile. My father, who was now a foreman, landed me a job in the steel mill and I stayed there for three years. The money was very good for a single guy my age and I was able to buy a nice car and have even more expensive fun, but after a few years I started questioning just what I was doing there. I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in a mill, I just didn't know where else I wanted to go. Still, I was slowly becoming resigned to following a life like that of my parents.

### **The Path Turns: From Resignation to Possibility**

Jaworski (1996) says we must "shift our world view from one of resignation to one of possibility...if we are to participate in the unfolding process of the universe" (p. 44). Jaworski tells how his chance meeting with Manny Dietz at the Grand Prix began a chain of events that altered the course of his life. A little bit of synchronicity also changed my life when by chance one day I met someone named Mike at a friend's house. Mike had just finished graduate school at IUP and received his master's degree in Student Personnel Services. Immediately upon graduation he found a very good job in the financial aid office of a nearby university. After discussing the graduate program with him at length, I somehow knew that this was I wanted to do. I guess the idea of working at a college just seemed right for someone who had spent his entire life around one.

I went back to school and with this new-found motivation quickly earned enough credits to graduate. I entered the Student Personnel graduate program immediately and completed it in



one year. College was so much easier, interesting, and enjoyable now that I had some sort of direction in life. After receiving my master's degree I worked for a few months as a children and youth services caseworker until I was hired as Assistant Director of Admission and Financial Aid at Saint Vincent College, a small private school in Latrobe, PA. I had somehow managed to travel an extremely long road of academic, career, and life uncertainty and found a profession that suited me at the end of it. It was when I entered this profession that I began to develop my personal leadership style.

### **First Steps on the Path to Leadership**

At the end of my second year at Saint Vincent I was promoted to Associate Director with supervisory responsibilities of five assistant directors and six support staff members. This was the first real supervisory position of my career. With no prior managerial experience or leadership training, I was forced to learn to lead by leading or at least by attempting to do so. I proceeded using my strong interpersonal and communication skills and by following my instincts and personal beliefs. Although I understand why Noddings (2003) may caution against the overzealous exercise of honesty, I have always believed in respecting others and in being honest at all times, despite the consequences. There is nothing I detest more than phoniness. I have always tried to live my life so that I could face myself in the mirror each morning and, thus, knew from the beginning that my most important guiding standards as a leader would be to always be my true self to others and to treat others the way I would want to be treated. This is essential to me and my leadership style. It is the personal integrity and identity that Palmer (1998) describes.

I had an enjoyable stay of almost ten years at Saint Vincent. The staff was relatively small and stable. We got along, functioned well, and were always successful. I gained valuable

experience in leading people. I learned the importance of always remaining open and available to everyone's feelings and ideas. Without knowing it, I was learning to follow Murphy's (2007) administrative rule of thumb: "if you don't listen to others, they won't listen to you" (p.58). However, I also learned that the other side of the coin is that you cannot always be everyone's buddy. Kegan and Lacey (1984) define leadership simply as "the exercise of authority" (p.199) and in order to achieve organizational goals there are times when even the most participative leader must make decisions that do not please everyone.

In August of 1994, I took the position of Associate Director of Admissions at Rowan College of New Jersey (later Rowan University). Not only was life in New Jersey a new experience, but life as an administrator at a medium-size state university was completely new to me. I felt the change immediately upon my arrival when I assumed the direct supervision of seven assistant directors and 13 clerical/support staff members. At Saint Vincent, I was Al or Albert to everyone. Suddenly, even though I tried to dissuade it, I was Mr. Betts to the 20 people who now worked for me. However, as Kouzes and Posner (2007) pointed out, "titles are granted but it's your behavior that brings you respect (p. 64)."

The Office of Admissions at Rowan University is a very diverse group with a mixture of employees from many ethnic backgrounds, levels of educational, and terms of service. When Thomas and Ely (2007) talk about "the varied perspectives and approaches to work that members of different identity groups bring" (p. 270), those perspectives are certainly manifested in the Rowan Office of Admissions and must constantly be taken into account. The clerical and support staff are members of the Communications Workers of America union, while the assistant directors are members of the American Federation of Teachers. Only the Director and Associate Director positions are out-of-unit managers. Most of the assistant directors have multi-year

contracts. Although I had been a union member when I was younger (I was a steelworker for almost three years), managing unionized employees was completely new to me. The employees enjoy rather strong job security. As a result, there is no impetus for some to do more than adequate work. As Begley (2005) asserts, "Organizations are essentially social constructions, not necessarily perceived by all individuals in the ways intended by organizational leaders (p.4)." The union protection greatly reduces the possibility of coercive management; thus, I believe one must instead be a leader by fostering self-motivation in employees and creating an atmosphere of pride and shared success. I have always done my best to instill such motivation, and I believe a participative leadership style is the best means by which to accomplish this.

When I began work as the Associate Director, the Admissions Office was functioning reasonably well. However, there was an underlying dysfunctional aspect to the office largely due to personality conflicts and a perceived lack of concern for individuals by the director at that time. As Stogdill (1948) maintains, "The pattern of personal characteristics of the leader must bear some relevant relationship to the characteristics, activities, and goals of the followers (p.130)." This was certainly not the case, and there was little or no positive modeling by the existing office head. Beck (1994) stresses the importance of fostering a feeling of trust and perceiving the needs and concerns of others. I believe my introduction into the office had a definite favorable impact on the general atmosphere, particularly with a clerical/support staff that had apparently been treated as second-class citizens for years. It was just not in me to treat others that way and the staff responded quite positively as I began developing sincere relationships with them as individuals. I realize now I was modeling the five facets of trust: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (Tschannen-Moran, 2007), and trusting relationships

began to develop between me and my employees. As a result, I was beginning to form more of a team than a pyramid organization.

Greenleaf (1977) says that those who are led “will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants (p. 20).” Although I obviously was not hired to lead my employees for these reasons, I believe I made significant strides as the associate director in introducing a more participative servant leader quality into our office management, hoping my employees would, thus, be more likely to respond to me. I made a concerted effort to create an atmosphere of caring by taking the time to listen to the ideas and concerns my employees expressed and began to develop a web of personal relationships within our office. Still, I was continually frustrated by being the number two man. Even though the entire staff reported to me, I reported to the director and he had the final say in all matters. I could never completely alter the office culture with him there. However, in February, 2006 a change was made by the Rowan administration and I was promoted to Director of Admissions.

### **Defining My Leadership Theory: The Leader as Player/Coach**

From those first years at Saint Vincent College, my leadership style has been consistently reshaped and refined over the years, and I am sure it will continue to be. However, as a result of reflection and my exposure to the leadership thoughts and theories of others in the Rowan University Educational Leadership doctoral program, I believe I am now able to define my style of leadership in terms of my own leadership theory.

The few leadership experiences I had early in life occurred mainly on football and baseball fields. In sports, coaches lead players. They make the plans and decisions and then watch as players carry out their directives, either successfully or unsuccessfully. Occasionally in sports, there are player/coaches; athletes who are still active members of the team who have also

been entrusted with the head coaching position. Two notable examples were Bill Russell with the Boston Celtics basketball team and Pete Rose with the Cincinnati Reds baseball team. When I think about translating athletic leadership into a work setting, I see my ideal in that of the player/coach. To me this is the model of a truly participative leader, a leader who cares about all the members of his team because he is one of them. A leader who provides his team with a sense of direction and management, while at the same time motivating his teammates through sharing equally in their efforts and in the resulting successes and failures. I want to lead by working alongside others, not just by telling them what to do and sitting back hoping they will do it the way I wanted. I want to be out in the field striving to win shoulder to shoulder with my teammates, not just standing on the sidelines directing the action.

Tschannen-Moran (2004) says good coaches show genuine concern for both the task at hand and those who have to accomplish those tasks and “Great coaches epitomize the five facets of trust in their dealings with people (p.104).” I believe in a very participative, caring, style of leadership. This is a result of both experiential and environmental molding and by a conscious decision to utilize this approach as I learned to manage and lead others over the years. Cronin (1995) calls leadership and democracy “warring concepts” (p. 304), but I see some democracy as a necessary part of any effective, authentic, participative style of leadership. I believe that without the input of followers into organizational decisions there is the likelihood as Mabey (1995) describes that “the group becomes overly dependent on the leader to solve its problems, resulting in complacency or passivity among followers (p.312).” More importantly, some level of democracy creates an atmosphere within an organization where all members regardless of status have the confidence to share their thoughts and feelings, producing analysis and discussion (Haiman, 1951). This encourages those being led to support leadership decisions because they

believe they have input into those decisions. It also provides them with increased motivation toward achieving goals because they feel they have assisted in setting them (Johnson, 1994). An additional benefit is that, in organizations in which all members feel they have significant input and responsibilities, it is easier for other members of the group to assume leadership roles in situations where the designated leader is absent (Kreitlow, Aiton, and Torrence, 1965).

Over the past five years I been able to lead the the Rowan University Office of Admissions without the encumbrance of someone above me with a differing leadership style. I have done my best to “model the way” as Kouzes and Posner (p. 64) put it by always working hard. This comes rather easily for me because I like to keep busy (knowing that my head will be the one to roll should we fail also provides significant motivation). While the former director did not participate in activities such as recruitment travel, evaluating a portion of the applicant pool, and speaking to campus tour groups, I have continued to assume an equal share of this workload just as I did as Associate Director. This is a necessary part of being the player/coach. I know my staff appreciates this and most of them have told me so. I have attempted to inspire a shared vision of success by being as participative as possible. Jaworski says a good leader must “inspire and encourage people in the group to move them and encourage them and pull them into the activity, and to help get them centered and focused and operating at peak capacity (p. 66).” I believe I have done that thus far in my time as Director of Admissions.

According to Osterman and Kottkamp (1993), “One of the primary ways the individual stays in control is by withholding information” (p. 52). The former director was a classic example of one who attempted to maintain control in this fashion. He reported little information from above to the office employees and performance evaluations were not done for years at a time. I never received a performance evaluation, verbal or written, in the entire ten years I

worked for him (although I am quite sure he was providing some sort of evaluation of me to his superiors). Rarely, did anyone in the office receive a pat on the back. Most only heard from the director when he had some complaint. “People need and want information about their own performance,” say Osterman and Kottkamp (p. 51), and I have made it a point to give employees frequent evaluations, both through the formal process and informally, since taking over the directorship. The positive response from them for something as basic as this has been incredible.

I believe the working-class roots of my existence manifest themselves most in the way I treat others, especially my employees and the students and families I interact with in the admissions process. I utilize a very participative leadership approach. I have the coal miner/steelworker work ethic in my blood and I could never expect anyone who works for me to work hard unless I was doing the same alongside them.

Rost (1993) discusses the difference between leadership and management, saying they are fundamentally different concepts and that the two terms should not be used synonymously, as is often the case. He also rejects the notion frequently projected by many leadership theorists that management is somehow an evil thing, while leadership is noble and good. “Leadership may, in some cases, be part of the answer.” says Rost, “But management, properly understood, is also part of the answers (p. 144).” Rost says leaders and followers are part of a leadership relationship and a leadership relationship does not necessarily include managers and subordinates. Managers and subordinates are part of a managerial relationship and a managerial relationship does not necessarily include leaders and followers. Rost declares “When managers and subordinates join forces to change the ways they produce and sell their goods/services . . . those managers and subordinates may have transformed their managerial relationship into a leadership relationship

(p. 151).” My overriding goal is transform the managerial relationships with my employees into leadership relationships.

More than anything, I want my player/coach style of leading by example to motivate everyone to work together and work hard to achieve a shared success. I aspire to be what Manz and Sims (1991) characterize as the Superleader. The Superleader strives to tap the self-leadership in everyone. The Superleader knows that true leadership is found within each individual, not from the outside, and “the most appropriate leader is one who can lead others to lead themselves (p. 213).”

### **Future Challenges: At a Crossroad in My Path**

Reading, researching, and discussing the many leadership theories over during my time in the Rowan University Educational Leadership doctoral program has been an enlightening experience. Although I have been in leadership positions in higher education administration for many years, I have basically led by instinct and by following my personal feelings and beliefs, without ever having any prior formal leadership training. In some ways, I feel like a man who decided to become a carpenter and began building things without any training from anyone else. Now, several decades later, some experienced carpenters are passing their knowledge of the trade on to him. I realize that I somehow managed to get a lot of things right, but I also see that there are many other, often better, ideas about how to accomplish what needs to be done.

I strongly believe in leading in the player/coach style. I attempt to lead in this manner because I think it is the most logical and moral way to lead. However, I would be remiss if I did not question how a player/coach style of leadership fits into the growing “corporate” culture in higher education. A more businesslike way of operating institutions has become increasingly evident at colleges and universities around the country, and Rowan is no exception. There are



important financial considerations involved in running a university, especially in these days of severe state budget cuts. Decisions must be made more frequently based on the bottom-line, sometimes even meaning the laying off of people who have been employed at the institution for many years. My bottom-line is that I attempt to lead with a participative, caring, democratic style of leadership. I lead in this manner because it is who I am as a person. I cannot change who I am, but I must learn to adapt my leadership style as necessary in order to meet the challenges of management in today's higher educational climate. Raelin (2003) says that leadership is influenced by the current culture of an organization and there is a "need to be adaptable to respond to changes that may require a shift in direction. As members entertain alternatives, the mission may become redefined; hence the process begins anew (p. 7)." It is important that I be able to lead my employees through sometimes very difficult changes. As Chaleff (1995) declares, "By staying aware of our reactions to those we follow, we learn to be more sensitive to our effect on those we lead. By staying aware of our reactions to those we lead, we learn to be more sensitive in our efforts to support those we follow (p. 31)."

### **Enhancing My Leadership: Learning to Lead Change**

I have attempted to incorporate into my leadership style many of the ideas and theories I have been introduced to over the past few years in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Rowan University. Some of the most important concepts I wish to incorporate into my leadership functioning relate to the concept of leading change. As a leader in a higher educational setting, I am often called upon and expected to lead changes of various types and magnitudes. In the past, I have relied on what has seemed logical, appropriate, and compassionate based on my knowledge, experiences, and personality when making the necessary decisions to guide my organization through changes. Now, using the theories put forth by experts

on the subject of change, particularly educational change, as frameworks and models, I am able to look at myself and my organization from different frames of reference. The experience of learning to lead change was an important facet of conducting this research study. In particular, if the results of this study should contribute to an eventual revision of Rowan's current SAT-required freshman admissions policy, the ability to help lead the successful introduction of such a significant change to my institution's culture will be vital.

I have been pleased to learn that much of what I have done in the past in terms of overall leadership style and organizational change leadership without any formal knowledge or training in the area of change has been mostly in line with the leading educational change theorists' ideas. My style of heading my organization has always been mostly in accordance with the ideas of Fullan (2001) and Kotter (1996) who, despite their differing viewpoints, both maintain the importance of being a leader rather than a manager. Fullan (2001) asserts that successful leadership is not leadership through charisma and that, in fact, charismatic leaders create a dependency that tends to dissuade followers from voicing new ideas. Fullan believes that to solve tough problems effectively, leadership, rather than management, is required. His thinking follows the lines of Kotter (1996) who differentiates management, whose purpose is planning, staffing, organizing, budgeting and controlling; and leadership, which serves to align and inspire people to overcome obstacles and adapt them to sometimes overwhelming changes.

Fullan (2001) discusses the concept of moral purpose. I agree with Fullan's belief that every good leader must have a strong moral purpose that drives him or her to strive to better the lives of those they lead. However, it is not sufficient just to state a moral purpose, but rather strategies must be created for achieving that purpose and followers must be strongly motivated to strive toward actualizing it. Argyris (1990) makes the distinction between an espoused theory,

which is a belief one holds about how to manage one's life, and a theory-in-use, which is the actual way one lives one's life. A moral purpose must be much more than a leader's espoused theory; it must become an organization-wide theory-in-use. Fullan (2001) says, along with having a clearly defined moral purpose, an effective leader must employ strategies that energize followers to deal with difficult problems. Leaders should be held accountable by measurable indicators of the extent to which people have been mobilized to achieve that moral purpose. Kotter (1996) speaks of vision, calling it "a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future (p. 68)."

Leaders who successfully steer their organizations through change do so with a combination of authoritative, affiliative, and coaching leadership styles. Authoritative leaders have a clear vision and strong enthusiasm, while affiliative leaders concentrate on creating harmony and building relationships with people. A coaching leader aims to assist people to develop and achieve their capacity (Fullan, 2001). I have likened my leadership style to that of a player/coach. Although I believe I do combine the qualities of authoritative, affiliative, and coaching leadership styles Fullan describes, I see myself as primarily a coaching leader who attempts to assist those I lead to develop to their capacity by modeling the way beside them.

Fullan (2001) and Kotter (1996) agree that leaders of change need to be able to present their ideas well, but should also make it a priority to seek out and heed doubters. By redefining resistance as a positive, leaders can learn to acquire valuable ideas from resisters. Abraham Lincoln modeled this ideal to the extreme with his "team of rivals" cabinet (Goodwin, 2006). Lencioni (2002) also emphasizes the need to embrace resistance and conflict within an organization as a positive, calling the fear of conflict one of the five dysfunctions of an ineffective team. According to Lencioni, open debate and passionate exchanges will help build

commitment to organizational decisions. As the key administrator responsible for coordinating the admissions process at Rowan University, I am certain my extensive knowledge of the institution's current admissions practices and the potential consequences of changing them enable me to present my ideas surrounding this important topic well. By interviewing and surveying Rowan administrators, faculty and students, along with the New Jersey high school guidance counselors who are key influencers of students and parents in the state, I have begun the process of engendering these varied constituents' involvement in, and potential support for, any eventual decision that might be made regarding the university's admissions policy of using standardized test scores for freshman admission.

Bolman and Deal (2003) say change makes people feel anxious and doubt their competence, reducing their ability to work with confidence. Fullan (2001) agrees, saying that a culture of change will always be filled with anxiety and stress, and thus emotional intelligence is a must for anyone leading an organization through change. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) say followers want a leader to provide supportive emotional connection and that good leaders steer the emotions of those they lead in productive directions. A leader with emotional intelligence has strong social skills, an awareness of and empathy for others' feelings and, most importantly, possesses a powerful self-awareness. In many ways it is what we refer to as plain old common sense. Emotional intelligence combined with intellectual intelligence produces effective leadership. I believe the degree of emotional intelligence I possess stems largely from my working-class roots. I feel the emotional intelligence I display is one of the primary factors that have led to the success I have enjoyed thus far as a leader in higher education. Certainly, should this research study contribute to a change in Rowan's current admissions policy, my emotional intelligence will play an important role in my ability to assuage any anxiety and stress

within the Office of Admissions and the university as a whole surrounding such a major change in business practice. Should such a change in policy be engendered, attempting to successfully introduce this change into the campus culture will require me to translate my player/coach leadership ideal to a much larger playing field.

### **Final comments**

In summary, this convergent parallel design mixed methods research study was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data that could be analyzed in an attempt to provide a critical look at whether the SAT should continue to be a required component of the freshman admissions process at Rowan University while at the same time assessing and enhancing my leadership within the Office of Admissions and throughout the university.

I found this study to be a profound learning process during which I reviewed and analyzed my own leadership beliefs and ideals. I have likened the development of my personal leadership theory to a path I have been following throughout my life. I believe conducting this research study served to take me a great deal farther down that path.

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**Appendix A: Faculty/Administrator Consent Form**

Dear ,

I am a student in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Rowan University. I am conducting a study to determine whether standardized test scores should be an optional component of admission to Rowan University. I am asking you to participate in this study.

I will collect and analyze qualitative data on your perceptions and concerns regarding the current use of standardized tests in admissions and a potential change in policy to test-optional freshman admission. The interview will be tape-recorded.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and all responses will be kept anonymous and confidential through the use of pseudonyms in this and any future publications and presentations. You may choose not to respond to any question or to not participate in the study as a whole without any penalty of any type to you. Any professional relationship that may exist between the participant and researcher will not be affected in any way by your participation or nonparticipation in this study. Participants should understand that they may be quoted, but their names will not be used. Participants will be free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty of any type. All data will be kept in a secure location.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time.

Thank you.

Albert Betts

856-256-4216

[betts@rowan.edu](mailto:betts@rowan.edu)

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I have read the above. I understand the study and agree to participate

**Appendix B: Assistant Directors Interview Protocol**

1. What do you think are the most important components of a high school student's academic profile for predicting college success?
2. How much weight should SAT scores be given in freshman admissions decisions?
3. How do you perceive the public's (potential students, parents, guidance counselors, etc.) view of test-optional admissions?
4. What positive outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from Rowan changing to test-optional freshman admissions?
5. What negative outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from Rowan changing to test-optional freshman admissions?
6. What effects, if any, do you think changing to test-optional admissions at Rowan would have on the in-coming freshman class?
7. What students, if any, do you believe would benefit from changing to test-optional freshman admissions at Rowan?
8. What students, if any, do you believe would be negatively impacted by changing to test-optional freshman admissions at Rowan?

### Appendix C: Focus Group Informed Consent Form

I agree to participate in a focus group about the use of the SAT in college admissions which is being conducted as part of a doctoral research study for the Educational Leadership department of Rowan University.

The purpose of this focus group is to collect student views on the use of the SAT in admissions and possible test-optional admissions. The data collected in this focus group will be combined with data from previous studies and will be submitted as a part of a doctoral dissertation.

I understand that I will respond to several questions pertaining to use of the SAT in college admissions and that my responses may be electronically recorded.

I understand that my responses will be anonymous and that all the data gathered will be confidential. I agree that any information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for publication or education provided that I am in no way identified and my name is not used.

I understand that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, that it will in no way affect my status as student-employee status of the university, and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Investigator)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)



**Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol**

1. What do you think are the most important components of a high school student's academic profile for predicting college success?
2. How much weight do you believe SAT scores should be given in freshman admissions decisions?
3. How accurately do you think your SAT scores measured your potential to succeed academically at Rowan?
4. How do you perceive the public's, (potential students, parents, guidance counselors, etc.) view of test-optional admissions?
5. What students, if any, do you believe would benefit from test-optional admissions?
6. What students, if any, would you believe would be negatively impacted by changing to test-optional admissions?

**Appendix E: Faculty/Staff Interview Protocol**

1. What do you think are the most important components of a high school student's academic profile for predicting college success
2. How much weight should SAT scores be given in freshman admissions decisions?
3. From your experiences with the students at Rowan, how well do you believe SAT scores predict freshman academic success at the university?
4. What positive outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from Rowan changing to test-optional freshman admissions?
5. What negative outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from Rowan changing to test-optional freshman admissions?
6. Do you have any other thoughts about the use of the SAT in admissions?

## Appendix F: Guidance Counselor Survey Invitation

Dear guidance counselor,

As you may know, I am the Director of Admissions at Rowan University; however I am also a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Rowan. In my role as a student, I am conducting a research study to determine whether to recommend that Rowan consider making standardized test scores an optional component of freshman admission. You are one of a small number of guidance counselors I am inviting to participate in this study by completing a brief on-line survey about the topic.

If you agree to participate, I will collect and analyze qualitative data on your perceptions and concerns regarding the current use of standardized tests in admissions and a potential change in policy to test-optional freshman admission. Your answers will be kept confidential and your responses will not be linked to you personally or your institution.

If you are willing to participate in this survey, please click on the link below to complete the survey before November 24:

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/WLRFR6L>

I hope you will be able to assist me as I examine this important subject. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [betts@rowan.edu](mailto:betts@rowan.edu) or at 856-256-4200.

Thank you.

Albert Betts

### **Appendix G: Guidance Counselor Survey**

1. What do you think are the most important components of a high school student's academic profile for predicting college success?
2. How much weight should SAT scores be given in freshman admissions decisions?
3. How do you perceive the public's (potential students, parents, guidance counselors, etc.) view of test-optional admissions?
4. What positive outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from a college or university changing to test-optional freshman admissions?
5. What negative outcomes, if any, do you believe would result from a college or university changing to test-optional freshman admissions?
6. What students, if any, do you believe would benefit from changing to test-optional freshman admissions at Rowan?
7. What students, if any, do you believe would be negatively impacted by changing to test-optional freshman admissions at Rowan?