



At a Glance

College Admissions Exams: SC Student Performance on SAT and ACT Compared to Nation, North Carolina and Georgia

October 2012

Introduction

Many postsecondary institutions use the results from both the SAT and ACT in conjunction with other measures to make student admission decisions. Since both tests are designed as assessments of student learning and readiness for post-secondary work, their importance cannot be discounted. College admission test scores, along with high schools grades, are often seen as a highly effective combination of predicting how well a student will perform in college.

A comparison of the performance of South Carolina test takers with North Carolina and Georgia test-takers yields interesting results not just in terms of the gaps in overall performance among neighbors. These data shed light on whether the students leaving our schools and entering post-secondary institutions are academically ready for the work they will encounter. In the majority of instances, South Carolina student performance falls below the nation and students in North Carolina and Georgia.

In an analysis of the top 100 SAT performing schools in all three states testing 25 or more students, only nine South Carolina schools were included: SC Governors School for Science and Math (2); Academic Magnet High School, Charleston (5); SC Governors School for Arts and Humanities (15); Daniel High School, Pickens (45); Charleston County School of Arts (46); Fort Mill High School, York 4 (68); North Myrtle Beach High School, Horry (86); Riverside High School, Greenville (87); and Academy for the Arts and Sciences, Horry (94).

However, 28 of the bottom 100 SAT performing schools in the three states testing 25 or more students, are South Carolina schools. For a complete list of the highest 100 performing schools and the lowest performing schools, log on to www.eoc.sc.gov.

SAT Background

- The SAT is a college admissions exam administered by the College Board, which tests reading, writing and mathematical skills of students. The SAT not only tests how students can apply knowledge from school, it measures academic preparedness for college by “examining how a student reasons, communicates and solves problems.”
- Twenty-four states, including South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia, have at least 50 percent of their college-bound seniors taking the SAT.
- On the SAT, students have the potential to score a 2400 -- 800 on each of the three sections of the test: Critical Reading, Mathematics, and Writing. According to the College Board, a total score of 1550 is “indicative of college success and graduation.”

SAT Participation

According to the College Board, mean SAT scores are not appropriate for state comparisons “because the percentage of graduates taking the SAT varies widely across states.” Similar percentages of students in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia take the SAT, making comparisons among these states appropriate. Table 1 shows the percentage of students who took the SAT in each state in 2011 and 2012.

Table 1: SAT Participation Rates*, 2011-2012, All Schools

	2012	2011
South Carolina	73%	70%
North Carolina	68%	67%
Georgia	81%	80%

Source: College Board

*Participation rates based upon the projection of high school graduates in 2011 and 2012 by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, and the number of students in the class of 2011 and 2012 who took the SAT in each state.

SAT Performance

Since 2006, the average SAT scores of students in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina have lagged behind the national average. Scores for South Carolina students, while significantly below the national average, also fall below students in Georgia and North Carolina. A steady gap was maintained between South Carolina and Georgia as the average fell in both states from 2008 to 2011 (Figure 1). However, in 2012, South Carolina's performance continued to fall while the performance of students in Georgia improved.

Figure 1: Mean Total SAT Scores (Critical Reading + Mathematics + Writing) for the United States, North Carolina, Georgia and South Carolina, 2006-2012

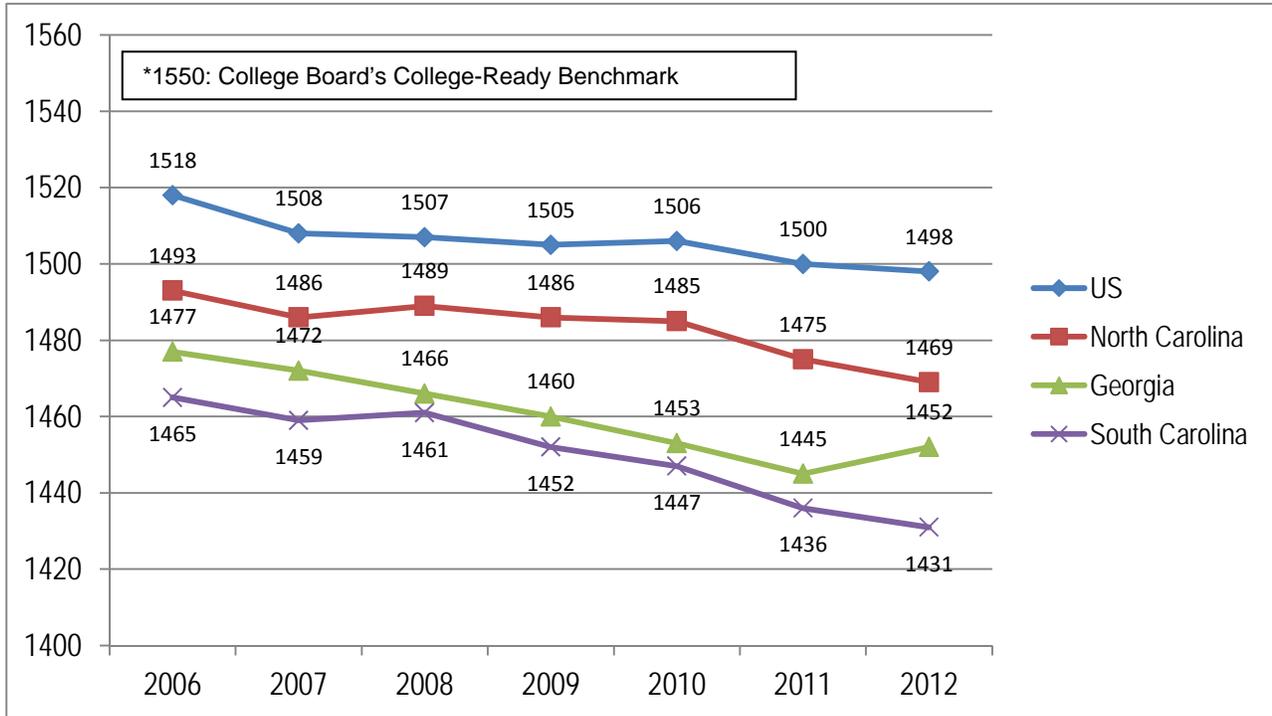
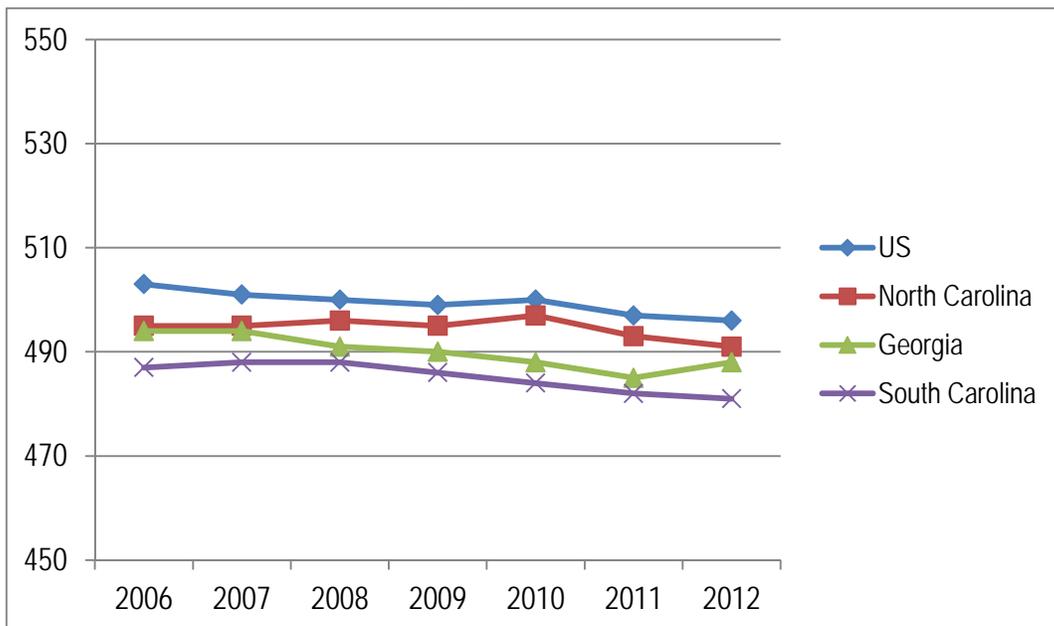


Figure 2 shows South Carolina student performance on the Critical Reading portion of the SAT, which is behind that of students nationally as well as North Carolina and Georgia.

Figure 2: Mean Total SAT Scores (Critical Reading) for the United States, North Carolina, Georgia and South Carolina, 2006-2012



SAT performance among higher scoring students

Less emphasis has been placed on the growing disparities among states and the nation as it relates to students who perform higher than their peers on the SAT. For each state and the nation, the achievement of an “average scoring” student is best represented by the 50th percentile score (the median). The achievement of high scoring students is represented by the 75th percentile. Data in Table 2 allows comparisons to be made between high scoring students in South Carolina and their high scoring peers nationally and in North Carolina and Georgia. High scoring students in South Carolina scored 20 points lower than students nationally in Critical Reading, 40 points lower in Math, and 30 points lower in Writing.

Table 2. Percentiles for States and U.S., 2012

Level/ Percentile	US			SC			NC			GA		
	Critical Reading	Math	Writing									
High/ 75 th	570	600	560	550	560	530	560	580	540	560	560	540
Average/ 50 th	490	510	480	480	480	460	490	500	460	480	480	470
Low/ 25 th	420	430	410	410	410	390	420	430	400	410	410	400

Source: College Board 2012 College-Bound Seniors State Reports

A percentile represents the point below which a percentage of scores fall. Comparing the 25th percentile point gives an idea of the range of performance in a group.

Table 3 shows the mean SAT subject-area test scores for students in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia based on student-reported high school grade point averages. For each self-reported grade level, students in South Carolina score lower in every subject area test on the SAT than their peers in North Carolina and Georgia.

Table 3. Mean SAT subject test scores among 2012 test-takers in GA, NC, and SC based on student-reported high school GPA

High School GPA	Critical Reading			Math			Writing		
	GA	NC	SC	GA	NC	SC	GA	NC	SC
A+ (97-100)	606	582	578	610	601	591	601	568	567
A (93-96)	549	542	534	554	562	546	541	526	519
A-(90-92)	514	503	496	518	521	506	504	483	477

Source: College Board

Course-Taking Patterns vs. Average Years of Study

Students in South Carolina who took the SAT in 2012 reported spending more time on average studying the six academic subject areas (Arts and Music; English and Language Arts; Foreign and Classical Languages; Mathematics; Natural Sciences; and Social Sciences and History) than students in Georgia and North Carolina. However, a much smaller percentage of South Carolina students taking the SAT reported taking AP or Honors English Language Arts (ELA) and Math than students in North Carolina (Table 4).

Table 4. Avg. years of study in six academic subject areas and course-taking patterns among 2012 SAT takers in GA, NC, and SC

	Avg. years of study in 6 academic subject areas*	% of 2012 SAT test-takers taking AP/Honors ELA	% of 2012 SAT test-takers taking AP/Honors Math
GA	19.1	43%	33%
NC	18.9	62%	53%
SC	19.9	46%	42%

Source: College Board

*Arts and Music; English and Language Arts; Foreign and Classical Languages; Mathematics; Natural Sciences; and Social Sciences and History

ACT Background

- Also a college admissions exam, the ACT measures college readiness by establishing benchmarks in English, Reading, Mathematics, and Science. Benchmarks are established to determine if students are academically ready for college coursework in all four areas.
- On the ACT, students have the potential to score a 36. A benchmark score is the minimum score needed on an ACT subject-area test to indicate a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in the corresponding credit-bearing college courses (which include English Composition, Algebra, Social Science and Biology.) Benchmarks are different for each subject-area test. For example, the benchmark for the Science ACT test is 24 while the benchmark for the English ACT Test is 18.
- ACT defines college and career readiness as the “acquisition of knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing first-year courses at a post-secondary institution (such as two-or four-year college, trade school, or technical school) without the need for remediation.”
- Twenty-eight states have at least 50 percent of their college bound seniors taking the ACT. In 2012, only 20% of college-bound seniors took the ACT in North Carolina. Beginning in 2013, all 11th graders in North Carolina will take the ACT. The participation rates for South Carolina and Georgia are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: ACT Participation Rates, 2012, All Schools

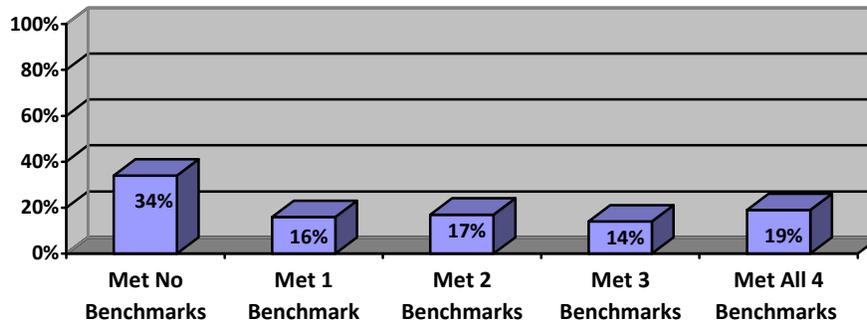
STATE	2012
South Carolina	57%
Georgia	52%

Source: ACT

ACT Performance

Figure 3 shows the percent of ACT-tested high school graduates in South Carolina by number of ACT College Readiness Benchmarks attained.

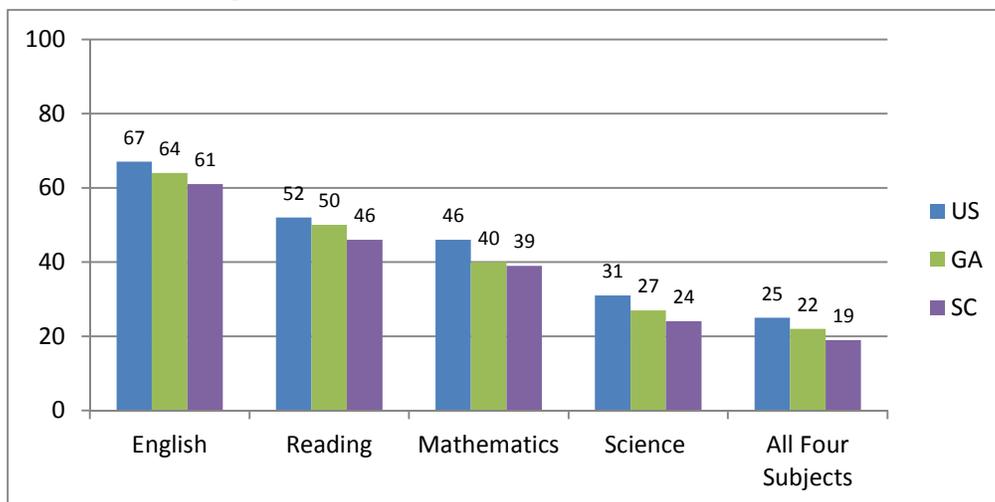
Figure 3: Percent of 2012 SC ACT-tested High School Graduates by Number of ACT College Readiness Benchmarks Attained



Source: ACT

As shown in Figure 4, South Carolina student performance on the ACT subject level tests falls below the performance of the nation as well as Georgia. Nineteen percent of SC test-takers met the college readiness benchmark for all four subject areas compared to 25% of test-takers nationwide.

Figure 4: Percent of ACT-Tested High School Graduates Meeting College Readiness Benchmarks by Subject in United States, Georgia and South Carolina, 2012



Source: ACT

Questions to Consider

- Both the SAT and ACT test students on more than recall knowledge; they are tested on their application of knowledge and challenged to use higher order thinking skills since these are skills they will use in their post-secondary education. Are schools properly preparing students for the academic work they will encounter beyond K-12?
- Why are SC students consistently falling behind their counterparts in North Carolina and Georgia on the SAT?
- Why are high-performing students in SC scoring well below their high-scoring peers nationally and regionally on the SAT?
- How can more students in South Carolina have access to more rigorous coursework (i.e., AP, honors courses), better preparing them for post-secondary work?

For additional information, contact the EOC at (803) 734-6148 or go online to www.eoc.sc.gov.