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For Sale: SAT-Takers' Names. Colleges Buy Student Data and Boost Exclusivity

Jori Johnson took the practice SAT test as a high-school student outside Chicago. Brochures later arrived from Vanderbilt, Stanford, Northwestern and the University of Chicago.

The universities' solicitations piqued her interest, and she eventually applied. A few months later, she was rejected by those and three other schools that had sought her application, she said. The high-school valedictorian's test scores, while strong by most standards, were well below those of most students admitted to the several schools that had contacted her.

"A lot of the rejections came on the same day," said Ms. Johnson, a 21-year-old senior film major at New York University, one of three schools that accepted her out of 10 applications. "I just stared at my computer and cried."

The recruitment pitches didn't help Ms. Johnson, but they did benefit the universities that sent them. Colleges rise in national rankings and reputation when they show data suggesting they are more selective. They can do that by rejecting more applicants, whether or not those candidates ever stood a chance. Some applicants, in effect, become unknowing pawns.

Feeding this dynamic is the College Board, the New York nonprofit that owns the SAT, a test designed to level the college-admissions playing field.

The board is using the SAT as the foundation for another business: selling test-takers' names and personal information to universities.

That has helped schools inflate their applicant pools and rejection rates. Those rejection rates have amplified the perception of exclusivity that colleges are eager to reinforce, pushing students to invest more time and money in preparing for and retaking exams College Board sells. Colleges say the data helps them reach a diverse pool of students they might have otherwise missed.

“The top 10% of universities don’t need to do this. They are buying some students’ names who don’t have a great chance of getting in,” said Terry Cowdrey, an enrollment consultant for universities and Vanderbilt University’s acting dean of undergraduate admission in 1996 and 1997. “Then the kids say, ‘well why did you recruit me if you weren’t going to let me in?’ They do it to increase the number of applications; you’ve got to keep getting your denominator up for your admit rate.”

At elite schools, the odds of admission have never been longer.

That’s because at most schools, the number of students admitted has remained flat …

… while the number of applicants to those schools has increased dramatically.

Explore acceptance rate data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Vanderbilt’s admissions rate has dropped to 11% in 2017, from 46% in 2002, according to an analysis of federal data. The number of Vanderbilt applicants rose more than three-fold over the same period. Vanderbilt uses College Board names to increase diversity and takes data privacy seriously, said Douglas Christiansen, Vanderbilt’s dean of admissions and a past chair of College Board’s trustees. “We have students from small farming communities, small rural communities, inner cities, large cities, small cities,” he said. “We cannot travel to all of these places.”

The race for applicants has stoked the environment of anxious families who place a high value on getting into elite schools. An increasingly competitive atmosphere helped set the stage for the admissions cheating scandal unveiled in March. At its center was college counselor William “Rick” Singer, who helped applicants cheat or bribe their way into schools. He has pleaded guilty to bribing college coaches and creating false athletic résumés. He also made use of the SAT, helping students get fake scores. A lawyer for Mr. Singer declined to comment.

College Board spokesman Zachary Goldberg said less than 1% of SAT tests were canceled last year because of concerns about cheating. He added the board has “significantly increased our test security efforts in recent years.”

The admissions scandal hasn't put a dent in the SAT's popularity, which has surpassed its main competitor, the ACT. The more students who take the SAT, the more data College Board has to sell schools.
About a quarter of U.S. colleges have stopped requiring the SAT or ACT for admission, saying they favor the wealthy and don't predict how students perform in school. A Los Angeles-based civil-rights group is pressuring the University of California system to drop the test requirement.

Mr. Goldberg said the company provides test-taker data to "give students the opportunity to start the important conversations with colleges and scholarship organizations and explore their options," adding that "the benefits…outweigh the concerns." College Board says it licenses, rather than sells, student names because schools may use the data for only a prescribed period and agree to abide by certain other rules.

Leonie Haimson, co-chair of Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, an advocacy group critical of College Board, said disseminating the data may harm a student's chance of getting into college. If a student performs poorly on the SAT and a school buys the test-taker's data, say, the school will know the approximate score even if it is a test-optional school.

College Board said using the information to disqualify a student would violate the conditions for using the data.

A paper conducted by College Board, not yet published, suggests the name-selling does little to benefit applicants or schools. Students whose data it sells are only 0.1 percentage point more likely to apply to the college than identical students who didn't receive outreach, the paper concludes, and the probability of enrolling in the college increased by 0.02 percentage point. College Board's Mr. Goldberg, said: "The numbers sound small but the effects are significant."

Long odds

The odds of getting into a specific elite U.S. school have never looked longer. For the class of 2021, Harvard University received 39,506 applications, up from 19,527 for the 2006 class, and it admitted 5.2%, federal data show. Northwestern's applications rose to 37,259 from 13,988, and it admitted 9.2%.

Elite colleges are harder to get into partly because a greater number of qualified students are applying from around the world. Students are also flocking to brand-name schools to hedge the risk of high college costs with a degree from an institution they believe will provide better income prospects.
Rejection ratios are rising also because the average student is submitting more applications. In 2017, 36% of freshmen applied to seven or more schools, up from 19% in 2007, according to the most recent Higher Education Research Institute annual freshman survey—so U.S. colleges overall have more applications in total to reject.
The multiple-application trend also forces many colleges to solicit more applicants as insurance—an accepted student is now more likely to choose another option and leave the school with an open slot.

To find more students to solicit, admissions officers can turn to College Board, which sells lists of high-school students' names, ethnicities, parents' education and approximate PSAT or SAT scores, at 47 cents a name.

Each year, 1,900 schools and scholarship programs buy combinations from among 2 million to 2.5 million names, College Board said, declining to say how many names in total it sells. Schools target combinations of geography, socio-economic class and academic interests. A college could buy a list of, say, soccer-playing Caucasian girls from Colorado, Wyoming and Montana who scored 1,200 to 1,300 on the PSAT, are interested in engineering and whose parents didn't attend college.

Some schools buy a half-million names a year, admissions officers say. Tulane University said it bought about 300,000 names last year from College Board. Tulane's applicant pool climbed 174% between 2002 and 2017 and its acceptance rate declined 62%, federal data show.

Students are asked before taking College Board's tests if they want to make their information available to schools. Ms. Johnson said it was not clear to her what the information would be used for, but she hoped schools that were interested in her would send mail. She said she didn't know her data would be monetized.

The four universities she said solicited—then rejected—her application declined to discuss her case or say whether her name was among those they bought from College Board. Stanford, Northwestern and the University of Chicago declined to say how many names they buy.

Stanford spokesman E.J. Miranda said it reaches out to students to help them find the best match and "not because we wish to be known as a most competitive university with a low admit rate." Stanford last year said it would no longer announce undergraduate application numbers.

Northwestern spokesman Jon Yates said College Board data "is only part of this process" in its admissions procedures, which "are based on a holistic approach that takes many factors into account."

A University of Chicago spokesman, Jeremy Manier, said its "engagement with prospective high school students is focused on expanding access to high-quality universities and providing support to families as they attempt to navigate the often complicated process of college applications."

Vanderbilt said it bought between 100,000 and 200,000 names last year. Marching orders to broaden Vanderbilt's reach and improve its reputation came in the early 1990s, said Ms. Cowdrey, the former acting dean and now an enrollment consultant. Senior administrators said "we have the money, come up with ideas," she said.

The admissions office doubled its recruiting staff and increased the number of names bought from College Board to about 150,000 from 60,000 during her time at Vanderbilt, she said. Back then, the names were from states where they hadn't previously recruited, focusing on students with scores above about 1,200 who were interested in education or engineering or were undecided.

Vanderbilt has since grown from a strong regional school that drew the majority of its students from the Southeast to one of the nation's most elite universities, with students from around the world. "This is part of our pipeline development strategy," said Vanderbilt's Mr. Christiansen.

Vanderbilt applications for the 2021 class increased to 31,462 from 9,836 for the 2006 class.

Overlooked students

College Board was created in 1899 by a group of private East Coast universities and grew to national prominence after administering the first SAT in 1926. The group's aim was to identify smart students at Midwestern public high schools whom elite private East Coast colleges would otherwise overlook. As university populations swelled after World War II, the SAT became a way for colleges to sort students from high schools of varying quality.

College Board's name-selling began in 1972, when it created its Student Search Service at the request of school counselors who wanted a wider array of students to have access to information about more colleges. The practice has grown in recent years along with the expansion in student recruitment.

College Board says it discovered SAT scores correlated closely with family income. Admissions officers and guidance counselors came to see the board as a gatekeeper of privilege rather than a leveler on merit. In 2012, the ACT—College Board's Iowa City-based rival with a reputation among admissions officers as more egalitarian—surpassed the SAT in total test takers.

The discussion among College Board trustees searching for a successor, said Paul Sechrist, then chairman, was: "It's time to do something about the SAT." They hired David Coleman, a former McKinsey consultant and architect of Common Core, the K-12 curriculum that aimed to raise national standards in math and English but drew critics over its rigor and focus on testing.

To get more students to take the SAT, he redesigned it. “We got rid of the tricky math questions and the irrelevant vocabulary words,” he said. “We made the test less intimidating.”

As elite schools’ acceptance rates dropped through the past decade, the pressure on students rose to get good scores on the SAT, taking it multiple times if necessary.

College Board’s business benefited. The number of students taking SATs jumped 36% to 2.2 million in 2019 from 1.6 million in 2016 and surpassed the ACT. In 2017, College Board’s revenue was $1.1 billion, according to its most recent tax returns, up from $760 million in 2012. The nonprofit generated $140 million in profits in 2017 and reported more than $1 billion in assets.

College Board’s business also benefited over the past decade as students began applying to more colleges. College Board recorded $100 million in revenue from its business that includes selling student data in 2017, according to the latest tax return available, up from $63 million in 2010. College Board declined to say how much money the sale of names generates within that business unit. It said it reinvests funds from Search into services that support students.

Growth came as it expanded the PSAT to eighth and ninth-graders, from 10th and 11th graders, in the 2015-16 school year. Mr. Coleman said the growth has also been driven by the effectiveness of the Search service. “If you want the usual suspects to come to your school,” he said, “you don’t need Search.”

College Board now controls the majority of tests students take to earn college admission, which places it at the nexus of opportunity, resources and ambition in American life, said Anthony P. Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce and a former vice president at Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT.

By selling student names to attract more applications, College Board is helping colleges expand and market their reputations of exclusivity, he said. “The College Board runs the game, and there is an intimate, mutual dependency between them

and the colleges," he said. "They are selling class and that's a good business to be in. People are terrified of falling out of the middle class. Basically, your job as a parent is to make sure your kids don't fall out of the middle class."

Schools buy scores inside a 50-point range and can't see a student's exact score. More than 80% of test takers say they want to make their information available to schools, and students who agree to give schools access to their information are 12% more likely than their peers to enroll at a four-year-college, Mr. Coleman said.

"We're their agent," he said. "They say, 'share this data.' And, by the way, it is overwhelmingly beneficial to them that we do."

Last year, after hearing from parents and teachers that the "voluntary nature of these pre-test surveys is not well understood," the U.S. Education Department issued a guidance note urging school districts to be explicit with faculty, staff and parents. Several states, including Illinois, have laws prohibiting the sale of student data. In October, nine state lawmakers asked the Illinois Attorney General to investigate whether College Board was violating two state laws that bar companies from selling or renting student data without a parent's consent.

College Board's Mr. Goldberg said the laws the lawmakers cited "are not applicable to the Student Search Service."

Cassie Creswell, who lives in Chicago and has two school-age children, helps lead a group advocating for the state to protect the data of its students. Illinois mandates high-school students take the SAT. "You shouldn't be able to collect data in a school," she said. "They're not in the business of making money off of kids."

Ms. Johnson, the senior at New York University—its 2017 acceptance rate was 28%—said she has helped her younger brother apply to college and has urged him not to fall into the trap she fell into, of thinking that getting into a prestigious school was the most important thing.

“A low acceptance rate is like an indicator of prestige,” she said. “I don’t think the focus is well placed.”

Write to Douglas Belkin at doug.belkin@wsj.com