



THE ASSEMBLY  
STATE OF NEW YORK  
ALBANY

CHAIR  
Subcommittee on  
Volunteer Emergency Services  
COMMITTEES  
Aging  
Energy  
Judiciary  
Local Governments  
Veterans' Affairs

MONICA WALLACE  
Assemblymember 143<sup>rd</sup> District  
Erie County

June 11, 2020

Kristina M. Johnson  
SUNY Chancellor  
H. Carl McCall SUNY Building  
353 Broadway  
Albany, NY 12246

Mary Beth Labate  
President of the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities  
17 Elk St.  
Albany, NY 12207

Dear Chancellor Johnson and President Labate:

I would like to commend you for your efforts to protect students, faculty and staff members, and their families amid the COVID outbreak. This outbreak has caused enormous challenges for colleges and universities throughout the state, and SUNY and CICU have been proactive in ensuring that every student continues to receive a quality education during this pandemic.

As you know, the COVID pandemic has prevented thousands of prospective college applicants from taking the SAT and ACT exams in person. The College Board initially planned to offer a home version of the test, which would have required a home computer with a camera and microphone, and three hours of uninterrupted, quality-video internet access. However, the College Board recently announced it would scrap its plans for online SAT exams, after thousands of students encountered technical problems while trying to submit online versions of the College Board's Advanced Placement exams. Instead, the College Board is working to expand the availability of in-person test centers this fall.

While the College Board is being proactive by trying to expand availability of standardized test exams, it remains likely that many students may not be able to take these crucial tests before the 2021 admissions season. The College Board states that availability is limited in areas that have been hit hard by COVID. For instance, neighboring Massachusetts had already reached 75 percent SAT test capacity for August, as of June 2. The College Board further states that applicants in densely populated areas, such as New York City, may have an especially difficult time finding open test seats. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that COVID will remain sufficiently contained by August or this fall that in-person SAT exams may be held safely. Public health experts, such as U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield, warn of a strong possibility of a second wave of COVID later this year, which may be worse than the outbreak that we just experienced.

In light of these challenges, I request that all public and private colleges and universities in New York State suspend the standardized test requirement for all freshman applicants until at least spring 2022. Maintaining this requirement is likely to have a disproportionate impact on low-income applicants and applicants of color, who already face disparities in average standardized test scores. A 2013 study published in the Teachers College Record found that students with a family income below \$10,000 on average scored over 280 points lower than students whose family income exceeded \$100,000. Similarly, a 2015 report for Inside Higher Ed found that the lowest scores were among students whose family income is below \$20,000, while the highest scores were among students whose family income exceeds \$200,000. This same report found that students of color, particularly black, Latino, and Native American students, on average score lower than their white peers. Researchers have cited several factors for this income/achievement gap, including lower-income students attending schools with fewer financial resources and being unable to afford tutoring, test prep, and enrichment activities. In extreme cases, the advantages of higher-income students extends all the way up to bribing SAT and ACT administrators in exchange for higher scores. This growing body of research suggests that by maintaining standardized test requirements, colleges and universities more deeply entrench the disparities between well-off and working-class students.

While I find the income disparities in standardized test scores alarming, I am also deeply concerned about new research that

shows standardized test scores may not be a reliable indicator of an applicant's academic performance. A recent study by the University of Chicago found that measuring high school GPA scores was five times stronger than ACT scores at predicting applicants' graduation rates. The researchers also found that the correlation between GPA and graduation rates held true across every high school that was evaluated. By contrast, in some cases, the researchers found no correlation between ACT scores and graduation rates.

This research on the unreliability and deep income disparities in standardized test scores would warrant consideration of waiving their requirements under ordinary circumstances. However, these are extraordinary times, and low income and people of color have disproportionately borne the impacts of these crises. Many of these young people are already dealing with death and serious illness in their families, fiscal instability at home, and insecurity in housing, food, and health care coverage. In addition, many applicants are grappling with the widespread social upheaval in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, which has resulted in curfews, property damage, and other societal disruption. We also cannot know how these crises have impacted individual students, nor can we expect that a one-day exam will accurately predict their ability to succeed in college under these circumstances. It's also unrealistic to expect that lower-income applicants and applicants of color will have adequate access to scarce in-person standardized exams and test preparation amid so much personal struggle and social upheaval.

The COVID crisis has forced us to rethink and, in some cases, reinvent longtime practices in the interest of public safety. However, these crises also offer us an opportunity to create a more fair and equitable society. The University of California system initially suspended the standardized test requirement in March in response to the COVID outbreak. Last month, UC announced it would extend the suspension until fall 2024 in order to develop a new test that "improves educational quality and equity." New York State universities should not miss this opportunity to create a more equitable education system, as inaction is likely to exacerbate the disparities in higher education. Therefore, I urge SUNY and CICU to follow UC's lead and eliminate the standardized testing requirements at least until spring 2022.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Monica Wallace".

Monica P. Wallace  
Member of Assembly  
Assembly District 143