September/October 2019 Lincoln-Douglas Topic Analysis

Resolved: In the United States, colleges and universities ought not consider standardized tests in undergraduate admissions decisions.

Colleges and universities: College is defined as "an institution of higher learning, especially one providing a general or liberal arts education rather than technical or professional training", while university is defined as "an institution of learning of the highest level, having a college of liberal arts and a program of graduate studies together with several professional schools, as of theology, law, medicine, and engineering, and authorized to confer both undergraduate and graduate degrees.". In the topic literature, the consensus seems to be that "colleges and universities" refers to postsecondary institutions that grant undergraduate degrees. Read more about the differences between colleges and universities.

Ought not: Ought is defined as "used to express duty or obligation". In LD, "ought" is often defined as a moral obligation. Debaters should consider how to define "ought not". Defining it as a moral prohibition places a burden on the affirmative to prove that it is morally prohibited for a college or university to consider standardized tests in undergraduate admissions decisions. Of course, there are other creative ways to define "ought not" that will frame the debate differently, such as the lack of an obligation or used to indicate inadvisability. The negative should consider what it means to negate an "ought not" statement and defend their position as one that proves there is a moral obligation to use standardized tests or that there is simply a lack of a moral prohibition against their consideration.

Consider: According to Merriam-Webster, "consider" means "to think of especially with regard to taking some action". In this resolution, the action in question is a decision regarding undergraduate admissions. This implies that the resolution is a question of whether standardized tests ought to be thought of when making decisions in the admissions process. It is worth noting that this word choice is fairly strict for the affirmative; it will likely be hard for the aff to defend that standardized tests can play *any* role in the admissions process, while the neg may argue that it can be merely "thought of" as a minor factor. Read more about what factors are considered in the current admissions decision process from College Board.

Standardized tests: The Glossary of Education Reform defines a "standardized test" as a test that meets two standards: "1) requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from common bank of questions, in the same way, and 2) is scored in a 'standard' or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students." Since the resolution is provides the context of United States undergraduate admissions, most evidence will come from an analysis of the SAT and

ACT. Most undergraduate programs will require international students to take the TOEFL exam to test their proficiency in English.

Undergraduate admissions decisions: This simply refers to the acceptance, waitlist, or denial process for a student applying to an undergraduate institution. Learn more about the typical application process, the holistic admissions review process, and a timeline of the process. There may also be an argument that merit-based scholarships are included under the umbrella of "undergraduate admissions decisions" since many are offered at the time of acceptance.

Affirmative arguments:

One well-researched affirmative argument on this topic is that standardized tests disadvantage students of color. The affirmative has a unique advantage on this topic in that there is empirical evidence about what a common affirmative world may look like. Recently, many colleges and universities have moved to what is now considered "test-optional", in that they do not require the submission of ACT/SAT scores to be considered for admission. This has provided academics with the opportunity to study the impact of required standardized test score submissions on the diversity of a school's applicants and classes. An article in Forbes describes one such study, stating, "Last year, William C. Hiss, former Dean of Admissions at Bates College — one of the first schools to embrace a test-optional policy — presented a study of more than 123,000 students at 33 test-optional universities to NACAC (the National Association of College Admissions Counselors). The study showed, among other findings, that minority students, women, first-generation applicants, Pell Grant recipients, and students with learning disabilities were all more likely to be non-submitters (that is, to apply without submitting test scores). These findings are consistent with the demographic data at schools that have adopted test-optional policies in recent years. Pitzer College, for example, asserts that since adopting test-optional policies, it has seen a '58 percent increase in diversity' (by which one presumes the school means non-white students) and 'the college has doubled the number of students from low-income, first-generation backgrounds.'"

A more straightforward argument along these lines is that standardized admissions tests are designed to disadvantage students of color. Read more here:
"The Racist Beginnings of Standardized Testing"
"Race gaps in SAT scores highlight inequality and hinder upward mobility"
"The Widening Racial Scoring Gap on the SAT College Admissions Test"
"College Readiness: A Critical Race Theory Perspective"

Another argument in favor of not considering standardized tests in admissions decisions is that the tests are built to privilege students from high income families. There is a significant cost to taking the test itself. Though fee waivers are available, students are encouraged to take the test multiple times to increase their score. Additionally, test prep courses, materials, and private

coaching constitute a billion dollar industry. These factors, and more, combine to create a gap in the admissions test performances of low income vs high income students. Try these arguments with a framework about equity or structural violence.

Read more here:
"The cost of taking the SAT and ACT, explained"
"These four charts show how the SAT favors rich, educated families"
"SAT Tests: Another Drain on the Family Budget"
"Class of 2018 SAT Results"

There is also a fair amount of research about the impact of high stakes testing on high school students. Given the cost, structure, and importance placed on the test results, this high stakes testing can cause stress and anxiety in teens. This anxiety not only affects the test results to make them an inaccurate reflection of a student's aptitude, but can also have long-lasting impacts on students' mental health. Read more here:
"Stressing about a High-Stakes Exam Carries Consequences Beyond the Test"
"Test anxiety and a high-stakes standardized reading comprehension test: A behavioral genetics perspective"
"Effects of Standardized Testing on Students' Well-Being"

Finally, you should look into arguments about how standardized tests used in admissions decisions are not reliable or accurate predictors of a student's success in college. If these tests are not useful in anything more than measuring a student's ability to take a test, they ought not be used in admissions decisions. Read more here:
"Are GPAs an Inconsistent Measure of College Readiness across High Schools? Examining Assumptions about Grades versus Standardized Test Scores"
"What Predicts College Completion? High School GPA Beats SAT Score"

Negative arguments:

One approach the negative may take is to disprove the benefits the affirmative claims will occur after removing the standardized test from admissions decisions. Depending on the way you define what it means to negate an "ought not" statement, it may be enough to simply prove that colleges/universities have no moral prohibition against using tests in decisions.

Again, the negative should look into empirical examples of test-optional schools and see how those policies affect their applicant pools. Do a deep dive into some of the studies that cite more diverse classes, and you may find that the numbers are not what they seem. From an article in Inside Higher Ed, "An article published last week in Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis argues that a college's adoption of test-optional policies does not increase the proportion of

low-income and African-American, Latino and Native American students who enroll. Instead, such policies benefit the institution. The study examined 180 selective liberal arts colleges, 32 of which had adopted test-optional policies between 1992 and 2010. It compared colleges with test-optional policies against colleges that required test scores. The report found that between 1992 and 2010, test-optional institutions did not see any more gains in low-income enrollment (measured by the proportion of Pell Grant recipients) than test-requiring institutions did. Nor did test-optional institutions see larger gains, on average, in the proportion of black, Latino and Native American students they enrolled." Read the full study this article cites here.

Additionally, negative debaters should look into the motivations behind some of the test-optional schools. Most affirmative frameworks will frame the debate in terms of benefits to students. However, according to an article from Forbes, "It's worth noting that non-submitting applicants' test scores don't figure into average SAT and ACT scores for the colleges, a loophole that also results in higher average scores reported to guidebooks and the U.S. News rankings — even among schools that purport not to value test scores. Schools that make SAT or ACT scores optional, in short, may benefit from a bump in their selectivity assessments. Test-optional policies also encourage an increased number of applicants — another factor that results in higher selectivity ratings, since the school will be able to accept a smaller percentage of its applicant pool."

To respond to common affirmative arguments about the test being biased toward privileged students, look into the ways that admissions testing companies are attempting to mitigate these concerns. Though the idea to add an adversity score to the SAT failed, could these tests provide a unique opportunity to collect demographic information or help with the admissions process in a different way? Read more:
"New SAT Score: Adversity"
"College Board Drops Its 'Adversity Score' For Each Student After Backlash"

Because the negative may need to defend that standardized tests should be merely "considered" in undergraduate admissions decisions, the negative can argue that they have the ground to defend a holistic admissions process in which test scores are only a small part of a larger equation. There are several articles from educators that argue that more data, not less, allows them to truly have a more rigorous and complete picture of a student's career. Weighing an objective test score alongside factors about a student's GPA, extra-curriculars, background, and school environment can help provide a more accurate look at whether they would be a good fit for a certain school. This is especially true in light of an evaluation of the teachers, private tutoring, and extracurricular opportunities that are afforded to more privileged students. Think about the recent college admissions scandal!
Read more:
"The Roles of Testing and Diversity in College Admissions"

“Approaching Highly Selective College Admission Testing”
“Measuring Success: An Examination of the use of Standardized Tests in College Admissions”

Happy debating!