Impromptu Essay Could Ease Colleges’ Worries Over Coaching

By TAMAR LEWIN

For college admissions officers, the College Board’s plan to add writing scores to SAT test results has raised a concern: How much does a student’s essay score reflect their actual writing ability?

“More and more kids are getting help with packaging themselves,” said Chris Hooker-Haring, the dean of admissions at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa. “It can make it difficult to assess what it is you’re reading, when you read that essay.”

As a practical matter, though, Mr. Hooker-Haring and others said it was unlikely that admissions officers would go online to read every single applicant’s essay.

“It’s hard to know how this will work,” he said. “But I can imagine cases where we’re reading something very polished from a student who’s never gotten higher than a B in English, never taken an honors course, and we’d like to see something a little less varnished.”

Neither Mr. Barnhill nor admissions officers at other schools have yet tried to use it to replace the essay required with the application, but they say if students received out-of-school help, that essay helps the college know them.

However, the new writing sample is already being used. It is, after all, a welcome addition to their arsenal of tools for assessing applicants.

Meanwhile, some college board officials have already started to see a disconnect, like a sophisticated essay from a student with mediocre English scores. But whether the scores measure speed more than brain power — he is particularly skeptical about the value of writing sample grades, which are, necessarily, subjective.

The College Board said it will use the same scoring process that it uses for the SAT II Writing test.

“We use two readers and a third reader if their scores are not in line,” said Linda Bunnell Shade, the College Board vice president for higher education. “We have standardized it, so usually the scores are very close.”

The new writing section on the SAT will closely mirror that SAT II Writing test, an hourlong test that includes a writing sample and multiple-choice editing questions. The new writing test will increase the length of the SAT to three and a half hours from three hours.