High schools alert juniors to state testing changes

Students must take ACT again with optional writing section to apply to universities that require writing score
By Tara Malone
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Illinois high school juniors this year will need to sweat through the grueling college entrance exam twice in order to apply to many top universities, a consequence of the state shelving the high school writing exam to save some money.

High school guidance counselors and college advisers are hustling to alert 11th-graders that after they take the college entrance ACT this spring as part of the state assessment, they must take it again with the optional writing section if they intend to apply to universities that require a writing score for admission.

"We would always say: 'Don't worry about the writing. You'll take (the complete exam) here at school,'" said college counselor John Baima at Fremd High School in Palatine. "Now we've changed and said, 'You need to take at least one test with writing just to keep your options open.'"

Fewer than a quarter of the nation's four-year universities expect a writing competency score of applicants, according to an analysis by the ACT testing company, but several of the country's most elite institutions are among that group.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was one of them before the change to the state testing regimen spurred the university to rewrite its admissions requirements.

Come 2013, the U. of I. no longer will require a writing competency score because applicants would, in effect, have to sit through another round of more than three hours of standardized testing to obtain a writing score for admission. Students cannot take the writing section alone, and must complete the full exam with it in one sitting, ACT officials said.

"We believe this may be an obstacle for some students, so are no longer requiring the test," university spokeswoman Robin Kaler wrote this week in an email to the Tribune.

The state's top educator, schools Superintendent Christopher Koch, highlighted the change in a message to school principals and superintendents last month.

State officials eliminated the writing exam given to high school juniors in a belt-tightening move last summer that saved about $2.4 million.

The writing assessments for elementary and middle school students already had been scrapped in 2010. But education officials fought to keep the writing portion of the 11th-grade exam because dozens of universities and colleges require a writing exam of applicants. That was lost, however,
when state lawmakers slashed an estimated $269.4 million in public education funding for the current year.

"It won't be brought back unless there is some funding for it," Illinois State Board of Education spokeswoman Mary Fergus said.

Northwestern University mandates a writing score for admission in what Associate Provost Michael Mills described as "a very strong predictor of success."

Neither the University of Chicago, the University of Notre Dame nor Loyola University in Chicago mandate a competency writing score. Same goes for Northern Illinois University, though a university spokesman said they are monitoring changes to the state testing regimen to "determine if changes to our practices are appropriate."

Many teens who aim for admission to the most selective universities take the exam twice with hopes of improving their scores. But high school counselors and educators worry the change could sting students who are not savvy to the new requirement or those who cannot afford the $49.50 cost of the college entrance exam with writing.

"They've got to make sure they take advantage of the opportunity or they'll be in a tougher spot," said Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Charles Johns in west suburban Elmhurst Community Unit District 205. Johns planned to remind district families about changes to the state test this week.

In Lake County, Stevenson High School college counselor Susan Biemeret highlighted the change during a sit-down with parents of high school juniors and intends to reinforce the message when she meets with individual 11th-graders in February.

Counselors in south suburban Thornton Township High School District 205 informed low-income students who qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch that they also may qualify for a test fee waiver to cover the expense of taking the ACT complete with the writing section for a second, separate time.

Three-quarters of the district's more than 5,800 students are low income, state records show.

"This is another step for the students," the district's director of curriculum and instruction, Dorith Johnson, said of the change.

This is not the first time the state has eliminated the high school writing exam.

Beginning in 2001, Illinois tested all high school juniors in writing as part of the Prairie State Achievement Exam. The section was cut in 2005 and then revived in 2007 as part of the ACT. The college entrance exam represents half of the two-day state assessment.

The Iowa-based testing company added an optional writing section in 2005 a company spokesman said. Only two of the eight states that administer the ACT to all 11th-graders — Michigan and North Carolina — currently require writing.