

Higher Education

More states adopt college entrance exam touted by conservatives despite concerns

Military academies and colleges in North Carolina and Indiana will soon accept the Classic Learning Test, embraced by the Trump administration and mainly featuring Western texts.

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By [Todd Wallack](#)

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — An upstart college entrance exam — designed to be an alternative to the ACT and SAT and featuring works from ancient Western civilization — is gaining support from the Trump administration and conservatives in red and purple states.

In recent months, the Pentagon decided to accept the Classic Learning Test for U.S. military service academies and scholarships at other colleges around the country. Indiana enacted legislation in March requiring its state universities to consider CLT scores, along with those from the SAT and ACT. And the North Carolina university system agreed to take the CLT, including at its flagship campus in Chapel Hill.

“We’ve had some big wins,” said [Jeremy Tate](#),  Source comment founder of the test and the Maryland company behind it, Classic Learning Initiatives.

While all three tests have verbal and math sections, the CLT stands out because it mainly features passages from noted philosophers, religious scholars, scientists and authors in the canon of Western literature, including Plato, St. Augustine, Dante and Shakespeare. Students can take the test at a traditional testing site or online at home.

Since its creation in 2015, the CLT has been embraced by many Christian schools, home schooling families and educators in the classical education movement who want children to study foundational texts that they say helped shape American history and culture.

But the exam’s growing popularity has sparked questions about whether the CLT is a reliable measure of students’ skills; how to compare CLT scores to the ACT and SAT; and whether it’s secure, since students can take the CLT at home, unlike the other two tests.

“We’re lacking evidence on the CLT,” said [Audrey Amrein-Beardsley](#), Source comment a

professor at Arizona State University who is reviewing public data on the test and plans to publish findings this summer.

And as the test becomes more widely used, the CLT’s creators hope it will push schools and teachers to introduce students to classic texts to better prepare them for the exam.

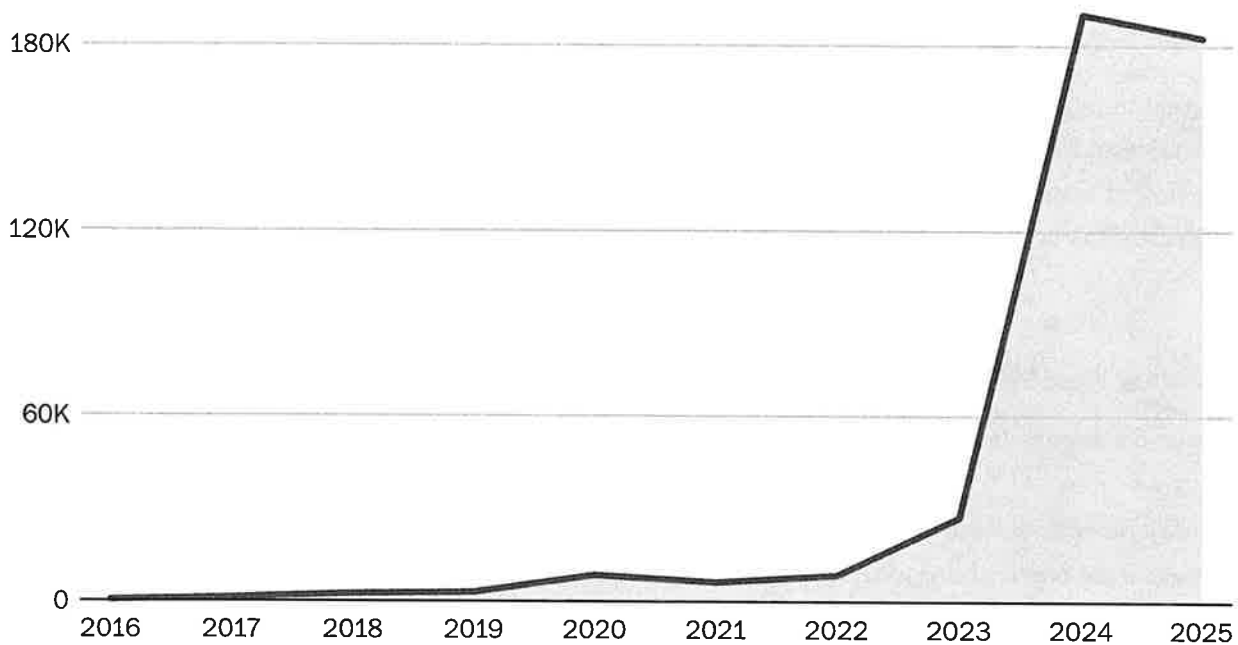
“We view this as a lever that shapes education,” Tate said.

But some critics worry the CLT’s list of authors could push out alternate points of view and give students a “sanitized and triumphalist version of history.”

“My biggest concern is that students won’t learn the truth about history,” said Curtis Dozier, a Vassar College professor of Greek and Roman studies who wrote a book about how far-right politicians use the classics to advance their world view.

More students are taking the Classic Learning Test

The number of test takers soared after Florida began using the test as an option for high school graduation and admission to state colleges in 2023.



Source: Classic Learning Initiatives

More than 350 universities, mostly private Christian colleges, accept CLT scores for admissions, in addition to the ACT and SAT. Many other colleges have been hesitant.

A [review by the Iowa Board of Regents](#) in 2024 couldn’t find a single peer-reviewed study on how well the CLT can predict success in college.

“There’s just been limited use thus far of the Classic Learning Test, so there isn’t sufficient data yet,” Rachel Boon, chief academic officer for the board, said at a public meeting at the time. The state is now searching for additional data, she said in an interview.

Because of the lack of research, the Iowa state university system decided in 2024 to use only the ACT or SAT for automatic admissions, the route most students use to attend.

Classic Learning said the test’s value was detailed in a study completed last year at Grove City College, a conservative Christian college in Pennsylvania. The study of 235 students, which has yet to be published in an academic journal, found CLT test scores are strongly correlated with first-year college grades. But the study’s author says he doesn’t yet have enough data to say whether it’s better or worse than the SAT and ACT.

“My conclusion at this point is that they are all three reasonable predictors” for college grades, said Gary Welton, assistant dean for institutional assessment at the school.

There’s also the question of what can be considered a good CLT score, since that test is newer than the ACT and SAT.

Classic Learning developed a table in 2023 to help interpret the numbers. For example, it says a score of 100 on the CLT (out of a perfect 120) is equivalent to a 1390 (out of 1600) on the SAT and a 31 (out of 36) on the ACT.

The company wasn’t able to reach an agreement, though, to work with the ACT and College Board to pool their data for comparison. “We are not sure these tests are similar enough” to compare the scores, said Priscilla Rodriguez, a senior vice president with the College Board, which administers the SAT.

Meanwhile, the CLT has gained strong support from conservatives, who complained the SAT and ACT have dumbed down their tests over the years. For instance, the SAT and ACT started allowing calculators in the mid-1990s. The SAT also eliminated its antonym section, designed to test students on vocabulary, and replaced longer reading passages with shorter texts, some just a few sentences long.

“It is generally bland material that doesn’t have any inherent value in it,” said Jonathan Butcher of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. “The Classic Learning Test is asking students to be prepared to handle more rigorous content.”

The CLT does not allow students to use calculators. And the CLT boasts that two-thirds of its reading passages come from an author bank of more than 160 writers and works, dating back to Mesopotamia. More than two dozen of the authors are Christian saints, theologians or religious thinkers, including the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, best known for his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Though the test is popular with many Christian private schools, it is not exclusively Christian or religious. And Tate, the test's founder, notes there is good reason to introduce all kinds of students to important Christian texts.

"I don't think anyone in the West can be considered seriously educated without some knowledge of the Christian intellectual tradition, including the Bible," he said.

While the SAT and ACT use some older literature, as well — the SAT once featured a passage from Aristophanes in 423 B.C. — they generally put more emphasis on contemporary writing than the CLT.

The ACT notes that it still features longer passages, while the College Board says it switched to shorter excerpts on the SAT to encourage students to read the passages closely, instead of scanning them for the answers.

Partly because the CLT allows students to take the test at home, it has grown especially popular in the home-schooling community.

Parker Falke, a 16-year-old home-schooler in Michigan, said he had to travel as far as an hour and a half to take the ACT but was able to take the CLT in a bedroom.

“It was nicer to be able to test in my own environment,” Falke said.

The ACT and College Board said they don’t offer remote testing because of the increased risk of cheating or the questions getting leaked.

“Trust is of the utmost importance,” said ACT spokesman Juan Elizondo.

Classic Learning executives said they have taken strong measures to deter misconduct, including requiring students to keep web cameras on and install software that prevents them from opening other windows on their computer screens.

“We have a really, really high standard for tech security,” Tate said.

The CLT faces an uphill challenge to become as popular as the SAT and ACT, but it is making gains. Nearly 183,000 students took the test last year, compared to just 291 a decade ago. By comparison, more than 2 million graduating seniors in the class of 2025 took the SAT at least once in high school and 1.4 million took the ACT. While most colleges do not require test scores, some elite schools do, and it’s widely thought that a high score can aid students’ applications at others.

More public colleges are also starting to accept the CLT, in part because of support from Republicans in state legislatures.

Indiana state Sen. Gary Byrne (R), who wrote the bill requiring public universities there that take the ACT and SAT to also accept the CLT, said he wanted to give students and parents another choice. He said he also hopes the measure will encourage more public schools to introduce students to classic works.

“It’s just going back to what we used to do,” Byrne said.

Lawmakers in Arkansas passed a similar bill last year, and another bill is moving forward in Ohio. And in 2023, Florida decided to accept the CLT as an additional option for university admissions, scholarships and to meet certain high school graduation requirements. Some other states, including Louisiana, Oklahoma and Wyoming, also now accept the CLT for state scholarships.

Despite the push from conservatives, Tate denied that the test is partisan or limited to one world view.

The author pool for the reading section of the CLT includes both Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, and Karl Marx, a father of communism. It contains Christian preachers, but also the Chinese philosopher Confucius, Muslim scholar Avicenna and Friedrich Nietzsche, the German writer who famously declared that “God is dead.” And while most of the authors are White, the pool also has Black civil rights leaders, like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr.

One-third of the passages come from sources outside the CLT’s public author list, including many modern thinkers. A recent exam included an essay from liberal jurist Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Regardless, the CLT faces other hurdles to catch up to the SAT and ACT. Some states offer either the SAT or ACT to nearly all public high school students to measure their performance. Students often stick with those when applying for college or scholarships.

And most of the elite schools that require entrance exams only accept the SAT and ACT.

Tate believes that is starting to change, with the military academies and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill starting to accept the CLT this year. And Tate said he recently had a private meeting with an Ivy League school.

In the foyer of the Classic Learning Initiatives headquarters, Tate showed a Washington Post reporter a historic marker that exemplifies the company's ambition.

The faded bronze sign notes the Classic Learning Test was founded in 2015, then takes a futuristic turn: "In 2040, the CLT surpassed the SAT and ACT as the number one college entrance exam globally." Tate expects that prediction to eventually become reality.

"We're tracking a little bit ahead of what we need to get to the 2040 goal — both in terms of test takers and good national awareness," Tate said.

By then, Tate might also know if he's accomplished his broader goal: changing what children learn in the classroom.

What sources are saying

Psychometricians use a phrase called face validity: does a test actually look like a serious measure of what it claims to assess?...

Jeremy Tate
Founder at Classic Learning Initia...

I am strongly urging educators, policymakers, and institutions to proceed with caution when considering the CLT for high-stakes...

Audrey Amrein-Beardsley
Professor at Arizona State Univer...

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a strong debate over the Classic Learning Test (CLT), with many expressing skepticism about its validity and potential for cheating, especially since it can be taken at home. Critics argue that the test promotes a conservative, Christian-centric curriculum... [Show more](#)

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