

UC takes a look at SAT I's worth

By Richard C. Atkinson
Sacramento Bee, February 21 2001

California has made significant strides in the last few years by establishing clear guidelines for K-12 school curriculums, setting high academic standards and employing standardized tests to assess student achievements. Yet for all these reforms, the admissions process at the University of California and other universities across the nation still puts great emphasis on the SAT I, the Standardized Assessment Test, aligned neither to standards nor school curriculums.

Simple fairness tells me this is wrong. We are, after all, a society built on twin notions: first, that actual achievement should be what matters most; and second, that people should be judged on the basis of what they have made of the opportunities available to them. Therefore, it seems only right that college-bound students should be judged on what they have accomplished during four years of high school, not on the basis of a single standardized exam designed to test undefined notions of "aptitude." For those reasons, [I am recommending to the faculty that the SAT I no longer be required for students applying to UC.](#)

Let me stress that I am not against all standardized testing. On the contrary, I believe tests that are developed properly and used responsibly can help students gauge how they are doing relative to other students while helping the public to assess the effectiveness of schools. The problem is not the use of standardized tests to assess knowledge in well-defined subject areas. The problem is tests that do not have a demonstrable relationship to the student's program of study, a problem amplified when the tests are assumed to measure innate ability.

Yet the SAT I looms large, not just in the lives of students, but for teachers, parents, admissions officers and university presidents. Parents who can afford it enroll their children in SAT preparation courses, now a \$100 million per year industry. Teachers are under increasing pressure to raise students' scores. College admissions officers are also under pressure to increase the SAT scores of each entering class. And while all UC campuses have tried to ensure that SAT scores are used properly in the admissions process, there have been reports in other parts of the country of colleges actually falsifying SAT scores to improve standings in college rankings such as those published in by *U.S. News & World Report*. In short, it has become the educational equivalent of a nuclear arms race.

It must stop. Under my proposal, UC will use standardized tests in its admissions process that are directly tied to the college preparatory courses required of students. Until these tests are available, we will continue to require three SAT II subject tests in writing, mathematics and a third test of their choice. Indeed, the SAT II begins to approximate what I judge to be an appropriate test for UC and other American universities since it tests students on specific subject areas that are well defined and readily described.

But changing standardized test requirements is only a first step. We should also adopt a more comprehensive, "holistic" admissions process that takes a range of factors into consideration, from the quality of a student's high school to the opportunities available to that student. A young person who has made exceptional progress in challenging circumstances needs to be given special attention.

These steps will continue to ensure the unrivaled quality of our student body while also serving a larger UC goal: We will help to strengthen high school curriculums and pedagogy, to create a stronger connection between what students accomplish in high school and their likelihood of being admitted to UC, and to focus student attention on mastery of subject matter rather than test preparation. Ultimately, it will help all students determine their own educational destinies and lead to greater public confidence in the fairness of our admissions process.

Richard C. Atkinson is president of the University of California. He can be reached at richard.atkinson@ucop.edu