

STANDARDIZED TESTS AND ACCESS TO AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES⁽¹⁾

Richard C. Atkinson

It is a distinct pleasure to present the Robert H. Atwell Distinguished Lecture. I have known and admired Bob for many years. As president of Pitzer College, as head of the American Council on Education, and in many other roles as well, he has been an eloquent voice on behalf of the nation's colleges and universities, and for that we are all in his debt. I cannot think of a better way to recognize his important contributions than by this annual lecture in his honor.

More than any country in the world, the United States has sought to put a college education within the reach of anyone with the talent and determination to succeed. And we have tried to allocate educational opportunity in ways that reflect American ideals of fairness and egalitarianism. Many argue that the use of standardized tests in admissions, and particularly the SAT, promotes those ideals by providing a common measure of readiness for college-level study. I have reached a very different conclusion, and that is what I want to talk about today.

A Proposal

Recently, I asked the Academic Senate of the University of California (UC) to consider two major changes in our admissions policies. First, I recommended that the University require only standardized tests that assess mastery of specific subject areas rather than undefined notions of "aptitude" or "intelligence." To facilitate this change, [I recommended that we no longer require the SAT I](#) for students applying to UC. This recommendation has significant implications for the University of California since we are one of the principal users of the SAT.

Second, I recommended that all campuses move away from admission processes that use narrowly defined quantitative formulas and instead adopt procedures that look at applicants in a comprehensive way. While this recommendation is intended to provide a fairer basis on which to make admission decisions, it would also help ensure that standardized tests do not have an undue influence but rather are used to illuminate the student's total record.

In the short term, these proposals will not result in earth-shaking changes in determining which students are admitted and which are rejected. In the long term, however, they will help strengthen high school curricula and pedagogy, create a stronger connection between what students accomplish in high school and their likelihood of being admitted to UC, and focus student attention on mastery of subject matter rather than test preparation. These changes will help all students, especially low-income and minority students, determine their own educational destinies. And they will lead to greater public confidence in the fairness of the University of California's admissions process.

Further, these changes will complement K-12 reform efforts that have been launched in California and around the nation to establish clear curricular guidelines, set high academic standards, and employ standardized tests to assess student achievement.

Let me describe how I came to make these recommendations. For many years, I have worried about the use of the SAT but last year my concerns coalesced. I visited an upscale private school and observed a class of 12-year-old students studying verbal analogies in anticipation of the SAT. I learned that they spend hours each month--directly and indirectly--preparing for the SAT, studying long lists of verbal analogies such as "untruthful is to mendaciousness" as "circumspect is to caution." The time involved was not aimed at developing the students' reading and writing abilities but rather their test-taking skills. What I saw was disturbing, and prompted me to spend time taking sample SAT tests and reviewing the literature. I concluded what many others have concluded--that America's overemphasis on the SAT is compromising our educational system.

Overemphasis on Standardized Tests

Let me make clear that I continue to be a strong supporter of standardized tests. I have high regard for the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which produces the SAT. Its staff knows how to develop and evaluate tests, and has an excellent record of administering tests and ensuring security. My concern is not with the ability of ETS to develop and administer standardized tests, but with the appropriateness of the SAT in college admissions.

Developed properly and used responsibly, standardized tests can help students gauge their progress and help the general public 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 that is amplified when the tests are assumed to measure innate ability.

Many students spend a great deal of time preparing for the SAT. But students are not the only ones affected. Nobody is spared--not teachers, not parents, not admissions officers, not university presidents.

Teachers, knowing that they will be judged by the scores their students make, are under pressure to teach to the test. College admissions officers are under pressure to increase the SAT scores of each entering class. They know that their president, faculty, and alumni pay attention to how SAT scores affect their standing in college rankings, like those published by *U.S. News & World Report*. The stakes are so high that nobody is surprised when the *Wall Street Journal* reports that some universities manipulate--and indeed falsify--SAT scores in an effort to attain a higher ranking.

Knowing how important the SAT is in the admissions game, some parents go to great lengths to help their children get high scores. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that a growing number of affluent parents shop around for a psychologist willing to certify that their child is learning disabled so he or she can qualify for extra time on the SAT.

Many parents who can afford the fees enroll their children in SAT preparation courses. Last year alone, an estimated 150,000 students paid over \$100 million for coaching provided by the Princeton Review, Stanley Kaplan, and the like.

Given attempts of some individuals and institutions to gain any advantage, fair or foul, is it any wonder that leaders of minority communities perceive the SAT to be unfair? These concerns are often dismissed as sour grapes, as special "ethnic pleading." The response by defenders of the SAT is, "Don't shoot the messenger." They argue that the lower performance of Blacks and Hispanics reflects the fact that Blacks and Hispanics tend to be clustered in poor schools, offering outdated curricula taught by ill-prepared teachers.

Minority perceptions about fairness cannot be so easily dismissed. Of course, minorities are concerned about the fact that, on average, their children score lower than white and Asian American students. The real basis of their concern, however, is that they have no way of knowing what the SAT measures and, therefore, have no basis for assessing its fairness or helping their children acquire the skills to do better.

Most troubling of all, SAT scores can have a profound effect on how students regard themselves. All of us have known students who excelled in high school, students who did everything expected of them and more, suddenly doubt their accomplishments, their abilities, and their basic worth because they scored poorly on the SAT.

Anyone involved in education should be concerned about how overemphasis on the SAT is distorting educational priorities and practices, how the test is perceived by many as unfair, and how it can have a devastating impact on the self-esteem and aspirations of young students.

However, while there is widespread agreement that overemphasis on the SAT harms American education, there is no consensus on what to do or where to start. In many ways, we are caught up in the educational equivalent of a nuclear arms race. We know that this overemphasis on test scores hurts all involved, especially students. But we also know that anyone or any institution opting out of the competition does so at considerable risk.

Change is long overdue. Accordingly, I am recommending that UC change its test requirements in the admissions process.

Evolution of the SAT

Let me place my comments in perspective with some observations about how the SAT has evolved over the years. Originally, the test was developed to serve a distinctly American purpose. The College Board first met in 1900 and held its first examinations in Spring 1901. The goals of these exams were: (a) to move away from the existing system, in which each university had its own examination (of unknown validity, and if students wanted to apply to several universities, they had to take one exam per university); (b) to provide feedback to secondary schools about what should be covered in their curriculum and the appropriate level of instruction (i.e., standards); and (c) to widen the net of student applicants (at the time, prep schools provided "certificates" for some students which served as the entry hurdle for others). The initial tests of the College Board were clearly achievement tests with no implication that they measured "innate intelligence." They were intended to serve an egalitarian purpose. They were designed to identify

students from a wide range of backgrounds who had demonstrated mastery of academic subjects needed to succeed in college.

But this changed in the 1930s. The then-president of Harvard University, James Conant, wanted to make the SAT a test, not of achievement, but of basic aptitude. His motivations were good. He wanted to reduce the advantage that wealthy students enjoyed by virtue of having attended schools with a rich curriculum and excellent teachers. However well intentioned, this change brought with it a sense that the SAT was akin to an IQ test--a measure of innate intelligence.

The College Board has since made attempts to change this perception. In 1990, it changed the name of the SAT from "Scholastic Aptitude Test" to "Scholastic Assessment Test." And in 1996, it dropped the name altogether and said that the "SAT" was the "SAT" and that the initials no longer stood for anything. Rather than resolving the problem, this rhetorical sleight-of-hand served to underscore the mystery of what the SAT is supposed to measure.

Many universities, faced with the problem of having to choose from among thousands of highly qualified applicants, have adopted practices that give too much weight to the SAT. College presidents and others have candidly acknowledged that, while they appreciate the limitations of the test, they continue to rely on SAT scores because they provide a convenient basis for justifying admission decisions.

All too often, universities use SAT scores to rank order applicants in determining who should be admitted. This use of the SAT is not compatible with the American view on how merit should be defined and opportunities distributed. The strength of American society has been its belief that actual achievement should be what matters most. Students should be judged on the basis of what they have made of the opportunities available to them. In other words, in America, students should be judged on what they have accomplished during four years of high school, taking into account their opportunities.

The California Conundrum

The University of California requires that high school students take a set of college-preparatory courses--ranging from English, social sciences, and foreign languages to mathematics and a laboratory science. Those required courses shape the high school curriculum in direct and powerful ways. Under the California Master Plan for Higher Education, students who compile an academic record placing them among the top 12½ percent statewide of high school seniors are guaranteed a space at one of the UC campuses.

UC draws its students from over 1,000 comprehensive public and private high schools around the state. These schools vary widely in terms of the quality of faculty and curriculum. As elsewhere in the nation, low-income and minority students tend to be concentrated in poorer schools, with a limited curriculum taught by a large percentage of under-prepared teachers.

UC has a particularly difficult responsibility to fulfill. As the public institution entrusted by the state to educate its top high school graduates, it must set high standards. At the same time, UC

must set standards that are attainable by individual students attending any of the state's comprehensive high schools. UC must also be mindful that it serves the most racially and ethnically diverse college-going population in the nation. The University must be careful to make sure that its standards do not unfairly discriminate against any students.

UC campuses have historically balanced these imperatives by giving the most weight to high school grades in the college preparatory courses required for UC admission. In this way, campuses attempt to strike a balance between meritocratic and egalitarian values. The criteria are meritocratic in that they emphasize grades earned in demanding courses. The criteria are egalitarian in that, in theory, they can be met by any student attending any high school in the state. However, because grading standards vary from high school to high school, we need some form of standardized testing and have in the past turned to the SAT.

When faced with large numbers of students applying for relatively few spots, admissions officers, unless they are very careful, will give undue weight to the SAT. All UC campuses have tried to ensure that SAT scores are used properly in the admissions process. However, because California's college-age population will grow by 50 percent over the next decade and become even more diverse than it is today, additional steps must be taken now to ensure that test scores are kept in proper perspective.

Recommendations

I have recommended that the faculty adopt the following criteria when setting requirements for standardized tests.

- The academic competencies to be tested should be clearly defined. There should be a demonstrable relationship between what is tested and what the student studied in high school. In other words, testing should be directly related to the required college preparatory curriculum.
- Students from any comprehensive high school in California should be able to score well if they mastered the curriculum.
- Students should be able to review their score and understand where they did well or fell short and what they must do to earn higher scores in the future.
- Test scores should help admissions officers evaluate the applicant's readiness for college-level work.

Let me now turn to specific recommendations. Henceforth, I will no longer refer to the SAT in general, but to the SAT I and the SAT II, and will assume that you are familiar with these two tests.⁽²⁾ Based on the criteria listed above, I have proposed that the faculty adopt the following changes in the admissions process.

- No longer require that students take the SAT I in order to apply for admission to the University.
- Call for the development of standardized tests that are directly tied to the college preparatory courses required of students applying to UC.
- Until these tests are available, continue to require the SAT II. Under current UC admissions policy, applicants are required to take three SAT II subject tests, namely, writing, mathematics, and a third test of their choice.

- Establish policies and guidelines governing the use of standardized tests. In particular, make sure that tests are not overvalued, but rather used to illuminate other aspects of a student's record.

The SAT II begins to approximate what I judge to be an appropriate test for the University's admissions process. It tests students on specific subjects that are well defined and readily described. Of course, it is not coordinated with UC- required college preparatory courses, but at least students and their families know what to expect.

For some years, UC has required both the SAT I and the SAT II. Because UC enrolls a large number of students and has required tests for many years, we have the data necessary to make judgments about the value of different tests in our admissions process. We know that high school grades are by far the best predictor of first-year college performance. We have also found that the SAT II is a better predictor of performance than the SAT I. Further, the SAT II augmented by the SAT I is only slightly better than the SAT II alone in predicting freshman grades.

Comprehensive Reviews

Changing standardized test requirements is a step in the right direction, but in the best of circumstances there will be a tendency to overemphasize test scores. Admissions officers at UC campuses recognize this problem and have introduced more comprehensive evaluation processes. Included in the comprehensive evaluation is the quality of the high school and the environment in which the student was raised. A student who has made exceptional progress in troubled circumstances needs to be given special attention.

These comprehensive procedures have been well received by the public. Students report that they appreciate review processes that look at the full range of their accomplishments within the context of the opportunities they enjoyed and the obstacles they faced.

Conclusion

These proposed changes in UC's admissions process will come at some cost. They are labor-intensive and therefore expensive. However, considering the importance of admissions decisions to individual students and to society at large, we have no choice but to invest the necessary funds.

If the Academic Senate responds favorably to these recommendations, then UC would reaffirm its commitment to assessing achievement in ways appropriate to the 21st century--a commitment to assess students in their full complexity. Such decisions are difficult because they involve making sense of grades earned in different courses taught at very different schools. They require that judgments be made about the opportunities available to individual students. They call on admissions officers to look into the future and make judgments about what individual applicants might contribute to campus life and, later, to society. These are extraordinarily tough decisions that require both wisdom and humility. But the stakes are too high not to ensure that the job is done right.

1. The 2001 Robert H. Atwell Distinguished Lecture, delivered at the 83rd Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education, Washington, D.C., February 18, 2001

2. The SAT IIs are individual tests designed to measure knowledge in specific subject areas. The SAT I, in contrast, focuses on verbal and mathematical abilities that are used to help predict first-year college grades.