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# Alliance *viewpoint*

## All Things Being Equal:

## Minorities & the Merits of Standardized Tests

The University of California system has decided to make an effort to forgo the SAT as an application requirement. This is big news in academic circles, for the California system is not only the largest public (or private) higher education system in the country but also includes some of its most highly respected universities. Does this mean that the controversial standardized test is losing its awesome influence as the chief arbiter of who does and who does not go to college? Perhaps... the verdict is still out. However, California's effort to challenge the grand dame of standardized tests is significant in a society that less than a decade ago was solidly behind standardized testing.

The last decade of the twentieth century has seen tremendous growth in the use of standardized tests to measure everything from the aptitude of second graders and the readiness of high school seniors to receive diplomas to the educational effectiveness of individual teachers, curricula and school systems. This decade has also seen the most well-known standardized test, the SAT, come under fire for being culturally biased in ways that preclude many minority students from achieving high scores. While the cultural bias debate rages, many elementary and secondary school systems that instituted standardized tests over the last 10 years are now faced with low scores across the board and have sent out a frustrated cry for help that can be heard around the country. How, why and whether or not we should bother with standardized testing have become crucial questions facing American education in the 21st century.

### Change tests or teaching?

The pressure is on as many school administrators seek to use standardized tests to quantify the progress of the new standardized curricula and raised standards adopted by school systems in the early 1990's. Parents, disillusioned with their children's scores and indignant over the old assumption of lack of ability that has always plagued minorities, are demanding that teachers teach to the tests. Those who can afford to are hiring private tutors—just as high school students who could afford to have done for years to prep for the SAT. Critics, like Alfie Kohn, author of the book *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, see the new standardized tests and teaching to these tests as an excuse for dumbed-down teaching that deprives children and educators of the time needed to help develop creative and critical thinking skills. However, in some grade schools, like those in Texas—one of the first states to

institute the new standardized tests and one of the few states to make a claim (though controversial) of positive results and passing test scores—educators are starting to see that when standards, curricula and made-to-order standardized tests come together, teaching to the test can be a very positive pedagogical technique.

On the college level, in the last four years there has been a significant increase in the number of minority students taking SATs—and their scores are on the rise. Fortunately, this means that more minorities than ever before are considering college. Unfortunately, the rise in scores, from an admittedly low starting point, is minuscule. So, the increased number of minorities taking the test is actually bringing down the scores on a national average. On the graduate level, the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) is beginning to encounter similar questions about bias.

These consistently lower scores for minorities persist even when the students' high school grade point average, socioeconomic status, level of parental education, and access to test tutoring all point in a positive direction. In the face of all these factors that usually predict higher scores, why are minority SAT and GRE test scores consistently lower than those of their Caucasian and Asian peers?

### Reaching the Top

The College Board—owner of the SAT, the GRE and several other popular standardized tests—admits that prejudice is probably responsible in part for this disparity. Its 1999 report, "Reaching the Top—A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement," concludes "that the limited presence of Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans among top students is a product of several forces, including intense poverty experienced by many minority youngsters, schools with inadequate resources, racial and ethnic prejudice, the limited educational resources of many minority families and communities and even cultural differences. At virtually all social class levels, underrepresented minority students are not doing nearly as well in school as their white and Asian American counterparts, particularly as measured by... standardized tests."

Should we scrap standardized tests, especially the SATs, in favor of other measures? Considering the huge investment this country has made in standardized testing over the last four decades, and the fact that even the University of California (*continued on back*)

# Are Standardized Tests Fair Indicators of Potential?

is still in favor of the SAT II subject tests, significant abandonment of standardized testing is unlikely. The SATs are taken by millions of students each year and generate billions of dollars. Also, many school boards around the country have already made a significant investment in other standardized tests. However, it seems that as more and more elementary and secondary schools turn to these tests, more and more colleges and universities are turning away from the SAT as their major admissions indicator.

“The SAT is enormously overvalued as a single data point for admissions,” said Columbia University President George Rupp at a media dinner for journalists and college presidents. “It is especially overvalued in the eyes of parents and students as well as the media that insist on ranking colleges according to data.” Columbia is one of the many colleges and universities that now use a mix of indicators, which may include a personal essay, extracurricular activities, references and grade point average as well as SATs to forecast student potential. Other schools, especially some of the state colleges, are advocating a tasks assessment approach that identifies skills students will need to succeed in college and graduate school and offer transitional help. However, neither of these approaches rules out all standardized testing.

GRE, MCAT, LSAT, ...

What of the GRE, Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), Law School Admission Test (LSAT), Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) and individual subject tests that assess students' potential for study beyond the bachelor's degree? Although the hue and cry about them has been nowhere near as vociferous as that surrounding the SAT and secondary school standardized tests, minorities generally receive lower scores on these tests than their white and Asian counterparts. Currently, there is only limited discussion of lower minority scores on these tests and few questions about their utility. However, as more minority students reach for terminal degrees, these tests will probably face the same scrutiny that the SAT has experienced.

The administrator of the SATs, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), has come under considerable pressure to change the tests to remove cultural bias. They have changed the test name from Scholastic Aptitude Test to Scholastic Assessment Test to just the SAT/PSAT, but they have been unable to rectify the innate cultural assumptions the tests make. Instead, the College Board offers suggestions on how to raise minority test scores, all built around the ETS's concept of “affirmative development.” According to their report, this is “the notion that our nation has both strong moral and practical interests in taking an extensive array of public and private actions designed to ensure that under-

represented minority groups significantly increase their rate of educational progress.” They are attempting to lessen the scores gap by prioritizing the development of minority high achievers within the elementary, secondary and higher education communities and expanding and strengthening supplementary education (after-school programs, summer school, tutoring, etc.).

Some critics blame low scores on society for giving minorities too much and the minorities themselves for not trying hard enough because they have fallen victim to a sense of entitlement. Others blame self-fulfilling low expectations, a line of reasoning with at least more merit than the former. Still others cite an unequal spirit of competition between minority students and their counterparts when it comes to standardized testing in general. After being told for a generation that “you can't study for these tests; get a good night's sleep and go in and do your best,” the truth can be quite daunting. When minorities find out that majority students not only study but also pay to be tutored for these tests and approach the entire process competitively, they are faced with new information that may require a modified strategy.

What will help?

So, what will help—how do we make standardized testing work for all of us? The College Board is right—by prioritizing success, expecting it, working for it and waiting for the results (all strategies that secondary education has failed to achieve consistently in the past); plus focused tutoring to augment broad-based teaching. Government, churches and community groups, private industry and academia need to make the effort to prioritize high achievement for minority students by extending help to elementary and secondary schools through programs that pick up where schools fall short. Also, as painful and frustrating as it is right now for everyone, standardized testing backed by creative and innovative teaching in grade school may be one of the best ways to bridge the gap between minority and majority SAT/GRE scores. At least it gives everyone a chance to learn the rules of the game from the start.

Alliance viewpoint is a semi-annual policy letter published by the Leadership Alliance, a consortium of twenty-nine institutions of higher education including leading research and teaching colleges and universities dedicated to improving the participation of underrepresented students in Ph.D. programs. Please direct all comments, questions or requests to the Alliance press office, (212) 854-2968, or executive offices, (401) 863-1474.



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