

The SAT Is Part Hoax, Part Fraud

New changes won't solve the real problem: the test can't predict a kid's future

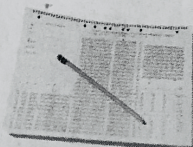
THE COLLEGE BOARD'S RECENTLY ANNOUNCED changes to its SAT college-entrance exam bring to mind the familiar phrase *too little, too late*. As the president of a selective liberal-arts college, I can state without much hesitation that the SAT is part hoax and part fraud. It needs to be abandoned and replaced. The College Board has successfully marketed its exams to parents, students, colleges and universities as arbiters of educational standards. The nation, however, needs fewer such exam schemes. They damage the high school curriculum and terrify both students and parents.

THE BLUNT FACT IS THAT HIGH SCHOOL GRADES, as long as they are adjusted to account for the curriculums and academic programs in the high school from which a student graduates, are a much better predictor of academic achievement in college than the SAT. The essential mechanism of the SAT—the multiple-choice test question—is a bizarre relic of long-outdated 20th century social-scientific assumptions and strategies. As every adult recognizes, knowing something, or knowing how to do something, in real life is never defined by being able to choose a “right” answer from a set of possible options (some of them intentionally misleading) put forward by faceless test designers. No scientist, engineer, writer, psychologist, artist or physician pursues his or her vocation by getting right answers from a set of prescribed alternatives that trivialize complexity and ambiguity.

These tests actually violate the basic justification for any test. First, despite the changes, the SAT remains divorced from what is taught in high school and what ought to be taught in high school. Second, the test taker never really finds out whether he or she got any answer right or wrong—nor does he or she ever find out why. No baseball coach would train a team by accumulating an aggregate comparative numerical score of errors and well-executed plays by each player, rating the players and then sending them the results weeks later. What purpose is served by putting young people through an ordeal from which they learn nothing?

The new changes to the SAT are harmless. But these modest reforms will do little to stem the rising tide against such testing. There is more and more resistance to pressuring students and

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The first SAT, given in June 1926, allowed students 97 minutes to answer 315 questions, including the following:

1. The projecting lower edges of a roof are _____

2. If a package containing twenty cigarettes costs fifteen cents, how many cigarettes can be bought for 90 cents?

parents into paying money to take a senseless exam that claims to be objective when, in fact, the most striking persistent statistical result from the SAT is the correlation between high income and high test scores. The richer one is, the better one does on the SAT. Nothing that is now proposed by the College Board breaks the fundamental role the SAT plays in perpetuating economic and therefore educational inequality.

So why do we remain addicted to the College Board's near monopoly on tests? Why do they have an undue influence on college placement? We pretend that the SAT is an objective instrument that measures one's ability to succeed in college. But the truth is less principled. The SAT is used by selective institutions for a much more practical and cynical reason—to help them sort applicants and justify dismissing many from consideration. Of course, SAT scores also have become an integral part of another moneymaking racket: college rankings. Institutions can boost their scores by admitting more higher-scoring students. The victims in this unholy alliance between the College Board (a rather lucrative nonprofit) and our elite institutions of higher education are the students—and our nation's educational standards.

WHAT IS NEEDED IS NOT MINOR SO-CALLED improvements to the SAT but an entirely new generation of testing instruments that use modern technology not only to measure the performance of our students but also to teach them. The truth is that the only legitimate test is one in which a question is put forward and an answer is required with no options or hints. The time has come for colleges and universities to join together with the most innovative software designers to fundamentally reinvent the college-entrance-examination system. We need to come up with one that puts applicants through a rigorous but enlightening process that reveals what they can and cannot do and what they know and do not know.

Only then can we reverse the unacceptable low standard of learning among high school graduates that we now tolerate and inspire prospective college students with the joy of serious learning. ■

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