

THE SAT INCHES ITS WAY TO OBLIVION

A Call By A Panel Of Leading Educators To Replace The Test With More

Telling Measures Is A Watershed Event

BY PETER SACKS | Peter Sacks is the author, most recently, of "Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education." **NEWSDAY, October 5, 2008**

More colleges are trying to measure drive, leadership skills and motivation.

'Society likes to think that the SAT measures people's ability or merit. But no one in college admissions who visits the range of secondary schools we visit, and goes to the communities we visit - where you see the contrast between opportunities and fancy suburbs and some of the high schools that aren't so fancy - can come away thinking that standardized tests can be a measure of someone's true worth or ability.'

When I saw that quote in my morning newspaper the other day, I did a double-take to make sure I wasn't in some odd parallel universe. The speaker wasn't some rabble-rousing outsider to the higher education establishment - like me, for instance - taking another pot shot at the venerable SAT. No, that was William Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard, who was now rocking the SAT's boat.

He was referring to his work on a commission sponsored by the National Association of College Admissions Counseling, which has called upon the nation's colleges and universities to reconsider their heavy reliance on standardized admission tests like the SAT.

The commission's report is eye-opening, not necessarily for the substance of its message, which isn't really new, but for the individuals and institutions now advocating this message of testing reform.

We have known for many years that the SAT is a relatively weak predictor of academic success in college, adding little to what admissions offices can glean from high school grades, class rank, writing samples and other assessment tools that predict performance in the real world, including the classroom.

Probably the single most important study in recent years reaffirming this conclusion was published in 2001. University of [California](#) researchers examined some 80,000 student records and found that high school grades and the SAT subject tests were significantly better predictors of college grades than the SAT.

And we have long understood that the exam quite powerfully reinforces and amplifies inequalities of educational opportunities between rich students and poor ones. The 2001 University of California study, for instance, found that the SAT subject tests and high school grades bore virtually no relationship to the socioeconomic status of individual students - quite contrary to the robust relationship of SAT scores to the socioeconomic background of test takers.

Given these shortcomings of the SAT, it's wondrous that so many colleges and universities have stuck by it for so long. Institutional habits die hard. Under threat of losing its largest customer, the University of California system, the College Board unveiled a new SAT just a few years ago. But those changes never addressed the fundamental flaws of the test and how colleges were using it - and misusing it - to make important decisions about admissions and financial aid.

Amid this turbulence, the NACAC report promises to be a watershed event in American higher education. A widely representative group of educators and higher education leaders authored it, chaired by Fitzsimmons of Harvard. And they produced the report at a time when many colleges and universities are grappling to find ways to make their institutions more inclusive and less the bastions of privilege.

In the current system, dominated by privilege, elitism and money, a marginally bright rich kid can get into a top college because of a well-prepped SAT performance, while the creative genius from an impoverished family is lucky to attend a community college - or to go to college at all.

College "quality" in the current higher education market is primarily determined by an institution's selectivity in admissions, which in turn is determined by the median SAT score of entering freshmen. The college rankings game, orchestrated by U.S. News & World Report, entrenches the dominance of median SAT scores as a measure of quality.

It's a phony measure, at best. Instead of measuring what colleges actually do for students once they arrive on campus, the current

rankings paradigm says, in essence, that you're a good college because you've admitted students with high SAT scores and turned away those with modest scores.

That Fitzsimmons would lend his support to any effort to diminish the role of SATs in college admission is a remarkable turn of events. Like other elite universities, Harvard would seem to have little to gain from challenging the SAT industry's hegemony. But, just maybe, our best colleges and universities have begun in earnest to engage in admissions and financial aid reform that would be better for the country, not just their own endowments.

Indeed, many university presidents and higher education leaders have been talking like Fitzsimmons lately: People like Anthony Marks, the president of Amherst; Gene R. Nichol, the former president at [William and Mary](#); and Colin Diver, the president of Reed College. Dozens of smaller, liberal arts colleges have already dropped the SAT as a requirement for admission. The most notable example is Bates College, which quit the SAT more than two decades ago, at wit's end with an SAT-obsessed culture that produced good test-takers but not necessarily good students for the intellectually rigorous college.

Among smaller universities and colleges often struggling to survive in the competitive higher education marketplace, going "SAT-optional" has become one way to increase the number of viable applicants from the working class and families of modest means who, educationally speaking, live on a different planet from affluent kids who've been given the best teachers, test-prep coaches and private college counseling that money can buy.

But dropping the SAT requirement is just one route to admission reform that the NACAC report will encourage among universities. In recent years, several institutions that still require the SAT have opted to use it more wisely, shedding the numbers-driven admissions systems that automatically weeded out those students with modest test scores.

At the University of California system, for instance, "comprehensive review" of all admissions files, including some 14 academic criteria, is now the norm. The system permits admissions offices to consider a student's academic performance in light of the social and economic circumstances he or she grew up with.

An SAT score for the daughter of a neurosurgeon growing up with every conceivable advantage is a far different indicator than the SAT score of the second-generation immigrant whose parents never finished grade school. No student is barred from admission - or guaranteed admission - based on a standardized test.

The NACAC commission's work also will likely encourage experiments in other types of admissions tests that could well improve upon the weaknesses inherent in the SAT, a "reasoning" test whose roots go back to the creation of IQ tests during the last century. For example, the report argues for increased use of subject-area achievement tests in college admissions, as a way of improving high school teaching in these areas and leveling the playing field for all students. That's a modest step in the right direction.

Other institutions have begun to fundamentally question the premises of either type of standardized test as a measure of academic ability. Oregon State University and Tufts, for instance, are using new types of assessments that measure "non-cognitive" traits in students, such as leadership skills, drive and motivation that predict college success as well or better than traditional academic tests.

In Oregon State's case, students are simply asked to write a few sentences each on a handful of questions called the "Insight Resume," which is incorporated into the college application and scored by teams of readers. The prompts ask students to describe leadership skills and experience, examples of overcoming adversity, experience and accomplishments in a field of knowledge or creativity, and so on.

Since implementing the Insight Resume, the university has found that for every one point increase on an applicant's Insight Resume score, the odds of that student's staying in college increases by 10 percent. The enrollment of disadvantaged students has increased under the new admissions system, as has academic performance of the entire campus - the result of a more motivated, more directed study body than what Oregon State got under the old paradigm.

Perhaps the writing is on the wall. In time, Harvard itself could make test scores optional for undergraduate admissions. Its Ivy League competitors would begin to follow suit. The [University of Michigan](#) and other elite public universities would be next.

As traditional admissions tests decline in importance, the marketplace will be forced to find other, more reliable measures of college quality and student performance. The [Boeing Co.](#), for instance, recently announced its own effort to rate colleges based upon the actual performance of its employees who are college graduates.

U.S. News will fight, of course. The College Board might get downright nasty in condemning alternatives to its flagship product. In the past, elite institutions would have chimed in with their hollow claim that test scores, while not perfect, are the best way we have to predict college success. The clothing on that old emperor is in tatters, shredded by years of mounting evidence to the contrary.

Long live the SAT. The SAT is dead.