

The SAT: Assessment of Potential or Evaluation of Background

For over 75 years, The College Board and the Education Testing Service (ETS) have been distributing and maintaining the SAT, an exam that used to be called the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Since its inception in the early 1900s, the SAT has been lauded as an exam used to assist in the college admissions process, providing an objective basis on which to identify the potential that a student has for higher education. This assumption has recently come under fire from various sources, as the insides of the SAT test have been torn out for all to see by companies like Kaplan, The Princeton Review, and Barrons. These companies have been run for decades as SAT preparatory courses and have successfully increased the scores of thousands of students nationwide (The Princeton Review). But if the SAT is supposed to measure a student's potential to achieve, then why are practiced students scoring higher than they should? Is this exam really as objective and well-used as the nation thinks?

In the 1920s, the higher education leaders were searching for a test that could help them with selective admissions to college. They wanted to admit the best and brightest students that they could find, and they needed an exam that would help them do just that. President of Harvard at the time, James Bryant Conant, asked then-dean of Harvard Henry Chauncey to create a program to select students of the highest caliber for their school. Chauncey went to psychologist Carl Brigham for assistance, and soon found out that Brigham had already created such a test, based loosely on his early IQ tests for the army, which contained similar questions to the SAT of today. Brigham, however, did not believe that it should be used for the college admissions

process. In an unpublished manuscript, Brigham confided that the SAT was not a test of aptitude, but rather of “schooling, family background, familiarity with English and everything else” (Pacenza

“Flawed”). He became one of the major opponents of SAT use in college admissions. After Brigham’s death in 1943, however, Chauncey was free to become the first president of the Education Testing Service in 1946, and to expand the use of the SAT during the 1950s. Today, the SAT is administered to over 2.1 million American teenagers. Those 2.1 million American teenagers are being put through a rigorous testing process known as college admissions. Even though the SAT is just a part of that process, it is a very large part. In the top universities of the United States, average SAT scores tend to be higher than those of lower universities. For example, the average SAT score of the University of Pennsylvania is 1385, 1467 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and 1490 at Princeton University (The Princeton

Review). Without scores like these, who could hope to enter one of these prestigious universities? The carefully crafted questions of the SAT could determine the education each of the 2.1 million teenagers receives over their next four years in institutional America. The SAT was once thought to be such a perfect predictor of achievement that no one made a loud complaint about it for years. Recently, however, the test has been called racist, gender-biased, and quite predictable allowing for easy coaching. According to tests done across the United States, Blacks consistently “test lower than Whites and Asians” on the SAT (Schrag 2). Women, as well, do worse on the SAT than males. The gap between scores was 42 points in 1998. According to the test’s sponsor, moreover, “females outperform males by every measure of real academic merit in both high school and college” (“College Board Hides Growing SAT Gender Gap”). So why are they doing worse on the test? Additionally, the SAT, contrary to the propaganda spread by ETS in the 1950s, is easily coached if one knows the tricks used by the test-makers. According to Stanley Kaplan, the founder of the Kaplan Education Center, and long-time tutor of the SAT, the test is not an aptitude test, but rather an exam assessing how well a student can prepare (Gladwell 90). For over 75 years the SAT has been part of the college admissions process while people like Stanley Kaplan have been detailing its faults. It seems that the SAT, even though it is said to be a good judge of aptitude, is actually gender, race and economically biased. Information coming directly from the College Board shows just how biased the SAT is against certain groups. According to the College Board website, female test-takers have gotten worse scores in almost every case in both the SAT I Verbal and Math sections (

“Background Information”). The 42 point gap between male and female scores is strange, as women have received higher GPA scores, higher class rank, and have done better in their years in college. Moreover, if an unbiased test were used for college admissions, schools like Berkeley would have “5% more women in [their] freshmen classes” (“Gender Bias”). If the SAT really is an unbiased exam, then women who are taking it should be doing better than their male counterparts.

The SAT has also been accused of being biased against ethnic minorities. Again, directly

from the College Board website, the statistics show that Blacks have done significantly worse than the rest of the population. In fact, while the general population of the United States has achieved a combined score of 1017, the Black population has achieved only a score of 860 (“Background Information”). Some say that this is good grounds for dropping the test, while still others say that this is the reason to keep the SAT, so that the Blacks can close the achievement gap instead of throwing it out because of embarrassment (White). This gap has been researched extensively by numerous people. Matt Pacenza, a writer for NYU’s department of journalism, quotes that “Kurt Geisinger found that 15 to 20 percent of US schoolchildren today speak a foreign language at home,” leading to lower SAT Verbal scores. Pacenza also quotes Andrea Swenson, a college counselor, saying that the SAT Verbal test “is full of vocabulary that our students don’t have time to acquire.” For new immigrants, the test is especially hard, because they are used to answering essay questions in their exams, and the SAT contains no essay sections (“Nature” 3). The SAT, far from being the unbiased, good predictor of freshmen college grades, simply places the minority on a lower achievement scale. Far worse than putting down minorities, this “unbiased” test seems to place people of a higher socioeconomic class in the higher bracket of intelligence. According to statistics strewn all over the college board website, people of higher socioeconomic class – those who make more money – tend to do much better on the SATs than those of lower class. Those with incomes of more than \$100,000 a year have an average combined score of 1131, whereas those with incomes of less than \$10,000 a year score 873 on the SAT (“Background Information”). Moreover, in 1978, an FTC investigation found that “41% of the coached students came from the top income bracket of \$30,000 or more” (Elert). As the original formers of the SAT predicted, it is a perfect judge of socioeconomic class (Pacenza “Flawed”). The more money a family makes, the better that family’s children do on this “unbiased” test.

One might begin to wonder why the fact of more money might mean better scores. The answer is simple: more money means more test preparation. Companies like Kaplan, Barrons, and The Princeton Review, thrive on the middle- and upper-class families using their services. As one can easily see on their websites, the test-prep. companies offer a variety of services, from books to study from to weekly courses in countless neighborhoods (The Princeton

Review). But how can they offer these services and be so successful? The answer, what some at the College Board and ETS might not want the public to know, is that the SAT is predictable. Quoted from a Princeton Review test-preparation book, “the current format of the test is more coachable than ever” (Cracking 5). The SAT is easily coached because the format remains the same, despite mounting criticism. Individuals are even able to offer advice on “simple arithmetic errors” or “wasting minutes doing algebra” (Baba). It is for that reason that companies like Kaplan offer private tutoring for \$4000. Using a non-profit mask, these companies make immense revenue from their students, from offering private tutoring sessions to simply the \$13 cost of receiving SAT scores a week before they come out for free (“SAT Scores Come Early”). Maybe without these organizations the general population would be more even-handed when they took the SAT, but most likely the socioeconomic factor would still take its toll. With all these factors to consider, the argument in favor of the SAT seems to crumble. Some say that the SAT in combination with other factors, specifically 4-year GPA in high school, recommendations, a personal essay, and an interview, is a great judge of the first year in college. According to the College Board, “the combination of SAT scores and high school grades is the best predictor of freshmen grade average” (Camara 4). Using highly technical mathematical skills involving “validity coefficients,” the College Board has conducted numerous informative studies showing the validity of the SAT. This information, however, is moot if one considers the fact that, on average, the SAT “ranges in accuracy from 8 to 15% in the prediction of freshman grade point average” (Elert). Even if the SAT can be used in conjunction with other information, the base fact that it is in itself a biased, unsurprising test, that can barely predict college performance makes it lose its credibility. The question remains of what to do now – if the SAT really should be disposed of. President Richard Atkinson of the University of California agrees that the SAT should be discontinued, as he stated in early 2001. He believes the test is a biased one, and an awful judge of a student’s potential (Schrag). This is a large step forward, as the University of California is the second-largest state school in the country, and many other schools look to it for advice concerning college admissions. Dr. Atkinson proposes that, for the time being, more emphasis be placed on the SAT II subject tests, exams in specific areas of curriculum, as opposed to the broad SAT I (The Princeton Review). However, if his

proposal is accepted, ETS will be forced to create a new, different SAT, stripped of its controversial analogy sections, with emphasis on higher-level math, and with a required essay prompt by 2006 (Fisher). In the meantime, colleges like Mount Holyoke College are allowing students to block their SAT scores, instead putting more emphasis on multiple essays and writing samples (Morse). And as the debate continues, even people like President George W. Bush feel that more emphasis should be placed on writing and essays (Lemann). Possibilities abound for a new test, some going as far as suggesting a test with a section regarding Lego construction to examine college potential (Winters). The only thing known for certain is that some sort of change is needed. Given all this information about the SAT and its supposed “good judge of potential,” who would want this test used in the United States? In the next few years, the SAT will have to go through a major overhaul if ETS wants to remain at the top of the testing ladder. Most likely, an essay section will be included in the revamped SAT. But no one really knows if, in the future, the next generation of children are going to be required to take this test, or whether college admissions will have advanced past it. The only thing that can be said for certain is that the SAT as it is now, with its cultural and gender bias, and predictability and “coachability,” will not and should not stay the same for the future generations.