

The SAT Controversy

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Abstract

Is there too much emphasis on the SAT? Are high school students stressing out over their performance on the SAT due to fear they will not be accepted by a college or university? Is this test really the academic performance predictor it is touted to be? When, early in 2001, the president of the University of California system, Richard Atkinson, asked his academic senate to consider making the SAT optional and rely on a more comprehensive analysis of applicants, there was an overwhelming response. Pro and con, academic and nonacademic, everyone has an opinion and feels strongly about that opinion. In this new millennium, the SAT debate has become one of the largest current issues in the field of education.

This paper is my attempt at researching, reviewing, and recapping the SAT controversy as an assessment learning activity. Although I am not a teacher or professor, my career is in higher education administration. I am interested in how we obtain and retain our clients, the students, and especially interested in this issue. During the last five or six decades, the SAT has developed into a multi-million dollar industry and has affected the lives of several generations. Its only competition so far has been the development of the ACT—could this be the beginning of the end for both?

The SAT Controversy

Introduction

As a high school student over 30 years ago, I sat for the PSAT early in my junior year, had a combined total score of 1150, and received National Merit Scholarship recognition and a small scholarship. In the spring I sat for the SAT and had a total score of 1210. My guidance counselor told me I wouldn't have any trouble getting accepted at Penn State, and could go to the main campus my freshman year if I so desired, which I did not. I planned on commuting back and forth to the Penn State York campus my first two years in order to save money. I didn't sit for the exam a second time even though I had another entire year of high school to finish. I had what I needed. In fact, I didn't apply anywhere else but Penn State.

That was over 30 years ago. Today high school students take special classes and buy SAT study software to prepare. When my nephew, Joshua Kitching, sat for the SAT a second time in 2001 (his first total score of 1340 wasn't high enough to suit him), and received his scores in the mail, he threw the letter to the floor in a fit, and went to his bedroom to sulk because he hadn't broken 1400. He then sat for it a third time for a high score of 1380.

Joshua is in his senior year of high school and has had several universities offer him rather large scholarships. The University of Pittsburgh recently offered him a full ride—tuition, fees, room, and board—much to his delight and that of his parents. He may not have reached his SAT goal, but the high scores he did receive in combination with being in the top 1% of his class, the quality of his writing, his participation in school

and community activities, and the degree of maturity with which he conducts himself, have served him well.

Obviously, Joshua had higher expectations and goals than I did at his age, and perhaps that is true for the majority of high school students today. A higher percentage of high school students plan to go on to college today—up from 36 to 55% between 1983 and 1998 (Condition of Education)—which means more competition for acceptance. As the competition for admission increases, so does the controversy over admission tests.

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This paper is my attempt at researching, reviewing, and recapping the SAT controversy as an assessment learning activity. Although I am not a teacher or professor, my career is in higher education administration. I am interested in how we obtain and retain our clients, the students, and especially interested in this issue. During the last five or six decades, the SAT has developed into a multi-million dollar industry

¹ Keynote address delivered at a conference on "Rethinking the SAT: The Future of Standardized Testing in University Admissions," Santa Barbara, California, November 16, 2001.

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History

SAT originally stood for *Scholastic Aptitude Test* although I also found several references to *Scholastic Assessment Test*, including the text for this class. According to an email message from an ETS employee, it was changed from aptitude to assessment in 1994 (Elert, 1992, 1996 Postscript). Over the years it has become better known as just the acronym. It originated from an Army IQ test developed by Carl Brigham, a Princeton professor. Although it was used first in 1926, widespread use didn't begin until the World War II as it began to replace other college entrance exams (Lemann, 1999).

Following the depression, James Conant, the president of Harvard, was looking for a way to select needy students with academic promise for a new scholarship program. College entrance exams were already in place but were a reflection of boarding school curricula (Lemann, 1999). Later, with the attack on Pearl Harbor, cumbersome essay exams were discontinued and the SAT took the place of entrance exams.

Enter the GI Bill and a new opportunity for American veterans to attend college. Soon after, the College Board and the American Council on Education (ACE) merged and Educational Testing Service (ETS) was formed and responsible for administering the SAT. Ironically, as the use of the test spread from the Ivy League of private, northeastern institutions, it was the University of California that the College Board bent the rules for: if UC promised to use the SAT in validity studies, the Board would make

them the first public university member even though they were not using the SAT as an admissions requirement (Lemann, 1999).

Twenty years later, in 1967, the University of California did make the SAT an entrance requirement—an action that benefited ETS tremendously since UC then became its biggest customer. By the mid 70's, the SAT was an entrance requirement at more than two thirds of the institutions listed in *Peterson's Guide to the Colleges*, and almost 1.5 million students were sitting for the exam annually (Nairn, 1980).

Following the development of the ACT Assessment (American College Testing Assessment Program) in 1959, institutions began to give students the option of submitting either test score, yet approximately 2 million students sit for the SAT annually.

Description

The SAT is a 3-hour verbal and math abilities test given to high school junior and seniors prior to college entrance. It is intended as a predictor of how prepared and how well a beginning student will do in college. Institutions use it to help select applicants for acceptance and frequently quote the average SAT score of their freshman class. Currently it consists of SAT I (Reasoning) and SAT II (Subject Tests). The 6 sections of SAT I could be considered an aptitude test (Nitko, 2001), and are made up of 2 verbal, 2 math, a Test of Standard Written English (TSWE), and a research section for pre-testing items.

The verbal and math sections are scored separately. A perfect score on either would be 800 points or a combined total of 1600. Since 200 points are given at the onset, the lowest score that one can obtain is a 400. Today, ETS is still responsible for

the administration and scoring of the exam. Until I began this research, I had been unaware that the scoring had been recentered in 1995. It was based on a study group of 1990 test-takers and used to realign the average to 500. As a result, scores since 1996 are higher than previous years.

Validity

According to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, the SAT I “is not validated to predict grades beyond the freshman year...” and studies that ETS personnel undertake consistently misstate the correlation coefficient of the relationship between SAT I scores and freshman grades. This same article cites a 1992 study by the University of Pennsylvania that compared high school class rank, SAT I, and SAT II in predicting cumulative gpa and found SAT I “by far the weakest predictor.” The University of California also made a validity study but used high school grades with SAT I and SAT II. Their 3-year study (1996-1999) showed the SAT I to be the weakest predictor, and ultimately led to President Atkinson’s request to make the entrance exams optional.

ETS did their own study in 2001 and determined that substituting the SAT II for the SAT I would have very little effect on the selection of women and African Americans (Bridgeman et al, 2001). Interestingly, the ETS researchers were careful to point out that they “have modeled only one type of information that goes into complex admission decisions.” Sounds like a disclaimer, doesn’t it?

It appears now as though much of the research is addressing the other selection criteria to determine the effect of not using any exams. Therefore, I was surprised to find that the Buros Test Review stated that studies have shown that SAT scores are

correlated with college performance. UC President Atkinson was certainly concerned about validity when he observed 12-year-olds being taught the test.²

Since the SAT is primarily concerned with *predicting* how well the freshmen will perform in their first year of school, it is predictive validity evidence that pertains. Regardless of the claims of ETS and the College Board, Elert contends that ETS' own data shows that accuracy only ranges from 8 to 15%.

In response to UC President Atkinson's request, the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) prepared a discussion paper which is found on the UC website: The Use of Admissions Tests by the University of California. Their primary conclusions regarding their own research of predictive validity were:

- High school GPA is the best predictor of freshman grades at the University of California.
- Test scores do contribute a statistically significant increment of prediction when added to a regression analysis combining grades and test scores.
- The SAT II appears overall to be a better predictor of freshman grades at UC than the SAT I.

Reliability

The SAT program has a long enough history to show consistency of assessment results. The Buros Test Review (citing Dressel, 1940) states that reliability of SAT scores is based primarily on an internal consistency estimation. "Typical internal consistency reliability coefficients exceed .90."

² 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.

The real question is whether the SAT is reliable as a tool in predicting which students will succeed. While the experts agree that SAT scores used in combination with other criteria can be beneficial in admittance decisions, there is also evidence that the test itself shows gender bias, under predicting female performance in college, and over predicting male performance (Fair Test Fact Sheet, 2001).

Issues

In his February 2001 lecture, UC President Atkinson hit a mark that is rarely seen in other discussions. He points out that even though at UC a student's high school grades are supposed to be given more weight than SAT scores when evaluating candidates for acceptance, it is conceivable that busy admissions officers may end up ranking the applicants by their scores instead. His suggestion to eliminate the SAT I requirement and retain the SAT II requirement until a better system is developed is a way to discourage the score ranking from happening. Howard and Matthew Greene, counselors, felt the same way:

There is no question that the candidates who present the highest test scores in their applications have a greater chance of being accepted by the selective institutions. This is why families with the means will provide their children with test preparation at any cost, and families without the ability to help their children prepare for the tests rail against what they perceive to be the systematic exclusion of their children from the better universities.

Another issue President Atkinson raised was that of SAT preparation. Like other tests for certifications or professions, SAT preparation has become a big business. Students who can afford to buy the software or pay the fees to sit for the exam over and

over, will end up scoring higher. Lower income and minority students can be affected through their lack of opportunity.

Still other articles and commentaries address concern for manipulation regarding minorities—both in the SAT itself as culturally biased, and in some cases, opinions that the move to get rid of the SAT is an attempt to increase minority enrollment.

Conclusions

Joshua Kitching is getting a chance to go to the University of Pittsburgh on a full scholarship even though he's from a lower middle-class family and attended a rural high school. He's worked very hard to be near the top of his class and by all indication will do very well at college. The true cost to him may not be known yet, however. At 18 years of age, he is undergoing medical tests for symptoms he has developed that may be linked to a nervous disorder. Whether his symptoms are a result of the stress over the SAT and getting into college, or the stress is a reaction from a nervous condition remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the University of California board has recommended that the university use achievement tests, but not the SAT I. Change is definitely on the horizon...at least for the largest of the American university systems. Prior to UC, the majority of institutions that have discontinued use of the college entrance exams have been small institutions.

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