A SPECIAL REPORT

The SAT's Greatest Test

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Social, legal, and demographic forces threaten to dethrone the most widely used college-entrance exam

BY BEN GOSE AND JEFFREY SELINGO

NEW YORK

THE SAT IS TO CRITICISM as a halfback is to a football—always on the receiving end.

For most of the past two decades, the College Board, which owns the test, has done a good job holding onto the ball, fending off critics who maintain that the test discriminates against female and minority students.

The board has sponsored several studies that show, for example, that the test usually gives black and Hispanic students a helping hand in the admissions process—it predicts that they will perform *better* in college than they actually do. And the board is scrupulously careful about material that appears on the SAT, so that there will be no more embarrassments about questions that would seem to favor students familiar with yachts.

COVER STORY

It's hardly surprising, then, that faced with an unprecedented assault from a wholly different quarter, the test's keepers resort to the standard defense.

"This is not a biased test," says Gaston Caperton, the College Board's president, from his office here near Lincoln Center "What we have is an unequal educational system. It's not the kids. It's not the test."

What Mr Caperton seems to have missed is that today the battle has shifted drastically, from accusations of bias to questions that undermine the very basis for the test and may, in the end, lead to its demise Today's critics have opened an assault on the use of what is essentially an IQ test to measure students' ability to learn. The outcome of the debate will affect how colleges with competitive admissions pick students, how racially diverse those students will be, and how high-school students prepare for college.

The College Board has for years tried to distance the SAT from its roots in IQ tests, but the perception remains that the most widely administered college-entrance examination measures intelligence, not a mastery of learning. Many education leaders—most notably, Richard C. Atkinson, president of the University of California system—say that legacy creates perverse incentives, as students waste time and money "prepping" for the SAT's idiosyncratic questions, such as the analogies section of the verbal exam.

If college-entrance exams were tied more closely to the curriculum, the critics say, students would have a clear idea of what standards they must meet, and high schools could more easily be held accountable when students fail.

Last February, Mr. Atkinson stunned college leaders by calling on his nine-campus, 170,000-student system to become the first public university with competitive admissions to drop the requirement that applicants take the SAT. The system's size and prominence immediately led to speculation about whether others would dump the SAT; the University of Texas at Austin and North Carolina's public colleges are studying the issue.

Mr. Atkinson's announcement "was by far the most important single anti-SAT effort ever in the history of the test," says Nicholas Lemann, author of *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), a recent book about the SAT.

In the 1940s, the University of California was the first major public system to require the test. "That was the key to making the SAT the dominant test," says Robert A. Schaeffer, public-education director at the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, also known as FairTest. "If you follow that historical analogy, you'll find that the key to ending the dominance of the SAT also lies in California."

Other threats also loom. Thirteen top colleges, including Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, are participating in a study to determine if state exams already given to high-school students may one day replace the SAT in college admissions. And recent court decisions and referendums may lead many colleges seeking a diverse student body to lower the weight they place on the SAT—or to ignore it altogether.

'An American Obsession'?

TO BE SURE, the College Board and the Educational Testing Service, which engineers the test, aren't exactly on the ropes. The obsession with identifying—and getting into—the best colleges has been as good for the SAT as it has been for college-guide publishers like *U.S. News & World Report*. Roughly 1.3 million high-school seniors per year take the test, and more than half take it at least twice, yielding an annual revenue stream of

A Century of Testing

STANLEY KAPLAN FROM THE COVER OF "TEST PILOT"

1900
The College Board, an association of several dozen private schools and colleges, is established in New York.

1905
Alfred Binet, a French psychologist, administers the first intelligence test, developed to identify children who are slow learners.

1926
Under the auspices of the College Board, the first Scholastic Aptitude Test is taken by 8,000 high-school students. Backers of the new test hope that it will help democratize the admissions process for the country's elite colleges.

1938
Stanley Kaplan founds a tutoring service in the basement of his parents' apartment, in Brooklyn, N.Y.

1944
Congress passes the Army GI Bill, which makes it possible for more students to go to college, increasing the influence of the SAT.

1948
The Educational Testing Service is established, in Princeton, N.J., to administer the SAT.

1959
The American College Testing organization is founded and begins marketing examinations to compete with the Educational Testing Service. The ACT eventually attracts the most use in the Midwest.

1900 1910 1920 1930 1940 1950 1960

TAKING THE SAT IN THE 1950S; REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF THE EDUCATIONAL TESTING SERVICE

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more than $200-million. For now, many admissions officers continue to rely on SAT scores to compare students who come from high schools of widely varying quality. Many colleges also feel they must report high average SAT scores to the guidebooks, in order to earn top rankings and keep applications flowing their way.

The SAT also may continue to thrive because the alternatives to the test are embryonic, too expensive, or lacking in political support. Mr. Lemann champions a national curriculum, with a national exam that matches it, but when the topic comes up on Capitol Hill, "everyone runs and hides," he says. The state-based exams, which for now merely test whether a student has mastered the basic skills

- **THE ACT** sees an opening in the controversy surrounding the SAT: A13
- **COLLEGES** debate whether dropping the SAT gives them a bump in rankings: A14
- **ESSAYS** on one college that dropped the SAT and another that reinstated it: B10

needed to graduate from high school, aren't of much use to a college with competitive admissions. Some large state institutions want to de-emphasize the SAT by considering a variety of subjective factors in admissions, such as overcoming adversity, but first they must find money to hire additional people to handle those reviews.

And while much has been made of the correlation between SAT scores and family income—the wealthier you are, the better your score, on average—that connection is even stronger on the standardized subject tests now known as SAT II, formerly called the Achievement Tests, one of Mr. Atkinson's proposed alternatives to the SAT.

"I hear a lot of people criticize the SAT," says Kurt M. Landgraf, president of the Educational Testing Service. "I've yet to hear what should be put in its place."

First administered in 1926, the SAT was designed to measure aptitude, or innate mental ability. It became widely used in the 1940s and 1950s, thanks in large part to James B. Conant, president of Harvard, who believed that subject-based achievement tests favored privileged students, whose families could afford to send them to boarding schools. The SAT, with its multiple-choice questions and systematic scoring, was seen as the great equalizer, a test that would allow the country's future leaders to be tapped based on intelligence rather than family connections. "The new elite's essential quality, the factor that would make its power deserved where the old elite's had been merely inherited, would be brains," Mr. Lemann writes in *The Big Test*.

Today, the enthusiasm for intelligence tests has plummeted, and most colleges claim to put more emphasis on high-school grades than on either the SAT or its primary competitor, the ACT

Still, the SAT, whose two parts, verbal and mathematics, are each scored on a 200-to-800-point scale, has no shortage of fans. "The test is the one unchanging benchmark that can differentiate between those students who get B's at a tough school and those who coast with A's from an easy school," says John Maguire, an admissions consultant and former admissions director at Boston College.

Enrollment managers also know that recruiting students with high SAT scores is an easy way to improve an institution's reputation. Dan Lundquist, vice president and dean of admissions at New York's Union College, says he uses

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How an SAT Question Is Created

Psychometricians at the Educational Testing Service, which creates and administers the SAT, are skeptical that state examinations could be used in place of the SAT.

Admissions tests, ETS officials argue, must be unambiguous, error-free, fair, and secure—qualities that are more easily stated than achieved. Here's how a draft question makes it on to the SAT.

Step 1: An ETS staff member or outside contributor drafts a question and puts it in a database.

Step 2: The question is scrutinized by at least two subject experts and given a fairness review to ensure that is "free from bias." Roughly 10 percent of questions are rejected at this stage.

Step 3: The question is tested on an unscored section of an SAT exam. The test-takers have no idea that the question will not be factored into their scores.

Step 4: Based on that "pre-test," ETS staff members analyze the rigor of the question, and how well it distinguishes between students of differing abilities, based on their scores on approved questions. They also examine whether, among students of comparable abilities, those from a particular race or gender scored poorly on the question. In a recent analysis, only 76 percent of verbal questions, and 87 percent of math questions, survived this stage.

Step 5: The question is thrown into a pool with thousands of other approved questions. It could sit there for as long as three or four years before being tapped for an SAT exam.

Step 6: When it earns a spot on an SAT exam, the question is analyzed by ETS staff members to see how it fits in statistically with other questions on the exam. Then three to four in-house subject experts review and revise the question. Finally, five to eight outside experts, including members of the SAT Committee, a group that includes admissions officers and guidance counselors, review the entire test that the question will appear on.

Step 7: After further editing and proofreading, the test is printed. The whole process—from the conception of a question to its appearance on an exam—takes at least 18 months to two years.

SOURCES: EDUCATIONAL TESTING SERVICE, CHRONICLE REPORTING

1961 National college enrollment surpasses four million.

1972 The Scantron Corporation, a pioneer in developing automated test-reading machines and standardized-test forms, is founded in California.

1981 John Katzman founds Princeton Review, which becomes Kaplan's main competitor in the test-preparation business.

1994 Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray publish, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, a controversial book that uses scoring patterns on the SAT, among other data, to link ethnicity to intelligence.

1999 California and Florida adopt their own "percent plans," further diminishing the weight of the SAT.

The U.S. Education Department's Office for Civil Rights, headed by Norma V. Cantú, warns that a reliance on tests in admissions may be discriminatory, because of the scoring discrepancy between minority and white students. Amid criticism, the office later waters down its warning.

1970 1980 1990 2000

1957 The number of students taking the SAT surpasses 500,000.

1978 In *Bakke v. Regents of the University of California*, the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down the use of racial quotas in admissions but says that colleges can use race as a modest "plus" factor alongside a variety of other measures.

1996 Proposition 209 passes in California, eliminating the state's affirmative-action programs. Admission of black and Hispanic students to the state's top public universities, which use formulas based in part on SAT scores, subsequently drops.

1997 After a federal appeals court bans the consideration of race in admissions at Texas colleges, the state Legislature votes to require public universities to admit all state residents who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high-school class. The policy reduces the role of the SAT, on which black and Hispanic applicants, on average, score lower than white students.

2001 Richard C. Atkinson, president of the University of California system, proposes dropping the SAT requirement in admissions.

COMPILED BY ERIC HOOVER
GRAPHIC BY JAMIE BAYLIS

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SAT by the Numbers

Number of high-school seniors who took the test in 2000-1:
1.3 million

Cost of taking the SAT:
$25

Cost of Kaplan's most popular preparatory course for the SAT:
$799 to $899 for 12 sessions

Percentage of high-school seniors who took the SAT in:

Percentage of SAT takers who take the test in both their junior and senior years:

	College Board *Owns the SAT*	Educational Testing Service *Designs and administers the SAT*
Headquarters	**New York**	**Princeton, N.J.**
Number of full-time employees	**493**	**2,100**
Revenue in 1999-2000	**$300-million**	**$600-million**
Percentage of revenue from the SAT	**undisclosed**	**32%**
President	**Gaston Caperton,** a former governor of West Virginia	**Kurt M. Landgraf,** a former CEO of DuPont Pharmaceutical
President's salary in 1999-2000	**$350,000**	**$350,000**

SOURCES: COLLEGE BOARD, ETS; CHRONICLE REPORTING
GRAPHIC BY JAMIE BAYLIS

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the SAT as a "scale tipper" with students who are similarly qualified.

But he acknowledges that there's another good reason to do the tipping. "If you get enough [students] with 50 points higher than the rest, you can bring your mean SAT score up," he says.

Mr. Maguire concedes that there's a certain hypocrisy at work. "In public, people will say the SAT's aren't worth a bucket of warm spit," Mr. Maguire says. "Nonetheless, the boards of trustees and the college leadership are looking at [them] as badges similar to the rankings, that indicate that they are improving."

However, critics of the test—and many students who take it—view the SAT as a black box. "When you say someone has 1100, what does that communicate to a high-school student who wants to do better?" asks David T. Conley, an associate professor of education policy at the University of Oregon, who is directing a project on the use of state tests in college admissions. "It doesn't communicate anything but to tell the high-school student to get smarter."

Nor is it clear how to prepare for the exam, which leads many students to Kaplan and Princeton Review, companies seen as possessing "tricks" that help students raise their scores. Even some high-school teachers are taking time away from basic reading and writing instruction to prepare students for the SAT—a practice that Mr. Atkinson criticized.

Bill Wetzel, a freshman at New York University, says the SAT made some courses during his junior and senior years at New Jersey's Red Bank Regional High School downright boring. "I noticed the difference between some classes, where the teachers and the students were trying to get the highest scores possible, and classes that emphasized curiosity and real critical thinking," he says.

Mr. Wetzel, founder of a group called Students Against Testing, notes somewhat sheepishly that his 1420 score helped land him at NYU, although he says that if he had to do it all over again he would attend an SAT-optional college. Now, he hopes to organize creative protests against the SAT and other standardized tests. He cites a recent "testfest" in Colorado in which students read books and played music while their peers took the SAT in a nearby building.

Using state examinations or subject tests would be an improvement, Mr. Wetzel says, but he isn't sure they would solve the core problem. "Both ideas have the potential for high schools to become factories for a different kind of test prep," he says.

Mr. Atkinson believes that his proposal, which would require students to take three SAT II tests (in writing, math, and a subject of each student's choice), would help students better understand the relevance of their high-school courses. There are more than a dozen SAT II exams, each covering a different subject area.

Some educators want to go even further, by using state examinations rather than the SAT. Every state requires its high-school students to undergo some form of statewide assessment, either at the end of their course work in core subjects or as a requirement for graduation. Advocates say the tests could provide a good snapshot of a student's readiness for college.

Last summer, a North Carolina legislator proposed a bill that would make public colleges there drop the SAT requirement in favor of the state's assessment exam. When college officials balked, saying the tests don't do a good-enough job of measuring high-level skills, the sides compromised by ordering a study of the issue by college officials. "If we're going to require students to take state tests, then we should use them for college entrance," says State Rep. Gene G. Arnold, a Republican, who sponsored the bill. "It's unfair to use the SAT when our standard course of study is not geared toward preparing students for the test."

Who Controls the Tests?

COLLEGE OFFICIALS elsewhere expect similar pressure from lawmakers who seek a better return on the hundreds of millions of dollars spent annually on the state exams. While those tests were intended to increase the accountability of public schools, some lawmakers say students have little at stake, once they realize how easy it is to pass, and thus have failed to take the tests seriously.

Because admissions officers would need the tests to provide meaningful information, college officials want a role in the development of future state tests. Thirteen research universities are sponsoring a study that aims to help states design better tests by agreeing on a set of skills needed by freshmen at their institutions. In addition, the project will create a database of current state tests, so that colleges can compare scores on tests in different states if they choose to use them in admissions decisions. The Association of American Universities, a group of 61 research institutions, is coordinating the project.

Without such a database, admissions directors say they will face a logistical nightmare in trying to make sense of scores from different states. John Katzman, founder and chief executive officer of Princeton Review and a supporter of state tests, says the College Board should take on the role of comparing state tests, by developing a chart similar to one that provides equivalencies for SAT and ACT scores.

"If the College Board won't do it, because they're too committed to saving the SAT, then other people will spring up that will, among them me," says Mr. Katzman, who favors the elimination of the SAT. Already, 100 Princeton Review employees are working on products to prepare students for state tests.

Wayne Camara, the College Board's vice president for research and development, says the group has no intention of assuming that role. He cites a 1999 study by the National Academy of Sciences that said such efforts were destined to fail. "Comparing the full array of currently administered commercial and state achievement tests to one another, through the development of a single equivalency or linking scale, is not feasible," the study said.

Mr. Camara notes that any effort to correlate the scores would be incredibly complex, because some groups— such as Hispanic students or women—may score lower on certain state tests than they do on others.

College officials say it may come down to how well the state tests predict freshman grades, which is what the SAT claims to do. In April, the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities released a study, financed by the College Board, that found that the SAT reliably predicts students' academic performance, not only as freshmen but throughout college.

"We may find that the end-of-course tests are great predictors, or we may find that they are consistent with everything else we're doing, in which case why would we have to add yet another measure that schools have to collect and send on to colleges?" asks Gretchen Bataille, senior vice president for academic affairs at the University of North Carolina system.

Mr. Caperton, the College Board president, says that when states learn how much it costs to develop fair questions and ensure security for an admissions test, they will use that money instead for other priorities, like paying teachers more. "Could you turn a statewide test into an admissions test?" he asks rhetorically. "Absolutely. But when you compare what it costs to what you get, nobody is going to spend their money that way."

Mr. Conley, the Oregon researcher who is heading up the Association of American Universities' project on state tests, says the money is worth spending to give students and high schools better measures of where they need to improve.

"The SAT is limited in its ability to provide diagnostic information to schools," Mr. Conley says. "It was never conceived as a means to bring about systemic improvement or to close an achievement gap between groups."

University of California officials agree. They acknowledge that students of different races will probably show the same performance gaps on the SAT II and even state tests. But those exams are better suited to closing the gaps and identifying poor schools, they say. "By having curriculum-based tests, we can relate [students' scores to] the quality of instruction in schools," says Patrick Hayashi, associate president of the University of California system.

A Move Toward Holistic Admissions

THE POINT DIFFERENTIAL between white and minority students is also leading to a diminished role for the SAT, simply because it lays bare the use of racial preferences in college admissions. In the 2000-1 aca-

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demic year, white students scored an average of 1060 on the test, compared with 859 for black students and 925 for Hispanic students.

Asian-American students were on top, with an average score of 1095.

Many large public colleges, which generally make admissions decisions based on a formula rather than a subjective "reading" of each application, have sought to preserve enrollments of black and Hispanic students by giving them an explicit bonus in the process. But in several high-profile legal decisions—including a ruling by a federal appeals court in August that struck down the admissions process at the University of Georgia—such mechanical awarding of racial preferences has been successfully challenged as unconstitutional by white students who were denied admission

As a result, admissions directors say that colleges may be forced to gravitate toward a more holistic set of criteria that recognize a wider range of achievement, such as leadership and overcoming adversity.

"Frankly, even those schools that are not highly selective are going to have to put in place procedures that allow for the reading of all applicants," says Jerome A. Lucido, associate provost and director of admissions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "The days of looking solely at students' grades and SAT scores and saying 'they're in' are coming to an end "

Some very selective public institutions, like North Carolina and the University of Virginia, have been reading every admissions folder for decades. Combined, the two universities receive 32,000 applications annually, and both hire temporary staff members to read them all Officials at both universities admit that taking essays and other written material into consideration is more subjective than using only grades and test scores, but they say that each application is reviewed by two or more readers to ensure consistency.

The Board of Regents at the University of California will vote on whether to establish a similar process, called "comprehensive review," next month. (The board won't decide whether to drop the SAT requirement until next spring.)

The proposed review process would require admissions officers at the university system's nine campuses to evaluate every student on a broad array of criteria, including initiative and hardship.

Berkeley Takes the SAT Down a Notch

THE SUPER-COMPETITIVE BERKELEY campus has already curtailed the influence of the SAT. In 1998, two years after the state's voters approved a referendum banning affirmative action in public-college admissions, Berkeley officials started reading every application, some 36,000 last year. Before then, the first half of available slots for freshmen, about 4,400 seats, were allocated solely on the basis of SAT scores and high-school grade-point averages.

Now, those coveted first seats are given out based on a much broader and less rigid formula. It still includes an applicant's SAT score and GPA, but adds other academic factors, such as the strength of the curriculum and pattern of grades throughout high school In the first year that Berkeley relied less on SAT scores, officials found that 25 percent of the admissions decisions were different than if the old procedure had been in place. (The remaining half of the university's freshmen are accepted using the expanded academic criteria and other personal factors)

Although the changes in the admissions process at Berkeley were aimed in part to capture underrepresented minority students in the wake of the state ban on affirmative action, the number of black and Hispanic students accepted at Berkeley has actually fallen since the new procedures were put in place. University officials say they expected the minority numbers to drop But "we didn't have the degree of loss that we would have had if we didn't

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ERICA LANSNER BLACK STAR FOR THE CHRONICLE

Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board "What we have is an unequal educational system. It's not the kids. It's not the test."

ACT Sees Openings for Expansion in Debate Over the SAT

BY BEN GOSE

AS A WATCHDOG of the testing industry, Robert A Schaeffer keeps a set of books about standardized exams above his desk. There's an entire row of volumes on the SAT, including some titles by well-known writers, but just one tome on the ACT. the ACT technical manual

ACT Inc., which owns and administers the test, labors in relative obscurity, even though its college-entrance examination is taken by 1.1 million high-school seniors per year, nearly as many as take the SAT.

"ACT gets no attention—and no scrutiny—because of the humble Midwestern style" at the company's Iowa City headquarters, says Mr Schaeffer, public-education director at the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, also known as FairTest. "They haven't engaged in the same kinds of ham-handed self-promotion that the folks at ETS and the College Board have."

FIERCE COMPETITORS

The College Board and ACT (formerly known as American College Testing) have been fierce competitors for nearly half a century. Given the criticism that the SAT has encountered recently, one might think that the ACT company would be comfortable with its low profile.

But officials at the company see the latest assaults on the SAT—particularly the possibility that the University of California might no longer require the test for admission—as an opportunity for them to gain market share by highlighting how the two exams differ.

Richard C. Atkinson, the University of California's president, hopes to replace the SAT with a curriculum-based test, so that any "coaching" for the test would be directly related to high-school course work. ACT officials say they wonder why he didn't just turn to them.

Mr Atkinson "is saying that the test needs to be anchored in what kids are studying," says Richard L. Ferguson, ACT's president. "The ACT is an excellent fit for that."

A FOCUS ON SUBJECT MATTER

Whether the ACT is indeed more closely linked than the SAT to classroom learning is a matter of sharp debate. It is true that the ACT has always focused on academic specialties. Today, the test lasts about three hours and includes four tests—English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. The SAT, which has tried mightily to move away from its roots in IQ tests, has only two parts—verbal and math.

Mr. Ferguson says the ACT receives less criticism than the SAT because it "always has been and remains focused on achievement" rather than aptitude.

Wayne Camara, the College Board's vice president for research and development, says the two exams can't be all that different because students who do well on one test also do well on the other, and both have similar performance gaps between students of different races. The ACT is "basically an SAT-comparable test that they've sprinkled some curriculum-related stuff into," Mr Camara says.

Mr. Ferguson says the two exams have "different philosophical underpinnings" even though students' performance doesn't vary much "Two things can be predictive of the same thing and not be equivalent," he says

Mr. Camara also dismisses the ACT's science-reasoning test. How can that test be based on the curriculum, he asks, when ACT officials have no way of knowing whether a student has taken chemistry or physics? ACT officials concede the problem, but say that's why their test is focused on reasoning skills rather than the specifics of scientific fields.

FairTest urges college-admission offices to abandon both tests, and while Mr. Schaeffer declines to says which test he prefers, his loathing for the SAT seems greater. "The types of questions on the ACT are more like the kinds of things that you would see on a test in high school—they're about content," Mr. Schaeffer says. "The SAT is consciously content- and curriculum-free. There are types of items on the SAT that simply don't exist in nature "

The SAT is widely used on both coasts, while the ACT dominates in the heartland and much of the South. Because a majority of the highly selective colleges are concentrated on the coasts, the controversies over using entrance exams in admissions have generally focused on the SAT.

HIGH STAKES IN THE NORTHEAST

Seppy Basili, vice president for precollege programs at Kaplan, a test-preparation company, says the SAT still accounts for the bulk of its business, in part because the stakes in states where the ACT has the lead "have never risen to what the stakes are in the Northeast Corridor and California." But he says that demand for prep courses on the ACT has been growing, as more colleges—including the Ivy League—give students the option of submitting ACT scores rather than SAT scores.

The ACT's dominance in the Midwest may contribute to the company's obscurity Many reporters for prominent news organizations attended college and now ply their trade on the coasts. "We're not on the beaten path for the major media," Mr Ferguson says. "As a result, there s an inclination for people to go the easy route." ■

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Colleges Debate Whether Dropping the SAT Makes Them More Competitive

BY ANDREW BROWNSTEIN

"THERE'S ALMOST a schizophrenia in college admissions," says Dan Lundquist, vice president and dean of admissions at New York's Union College.

"There's this mercenary instinct to put your colleges at the best possible advantage. At the same time, most of us are educators who are against that kind of crude positioning."

Nowhere is that clash of values more evident than in how administrators view their favorite whipping boys, the *U.S. News & World Report* college guide and the SAT. If one could find a way to use the test they love to hate to improve their standing in the rankings they love to hate, the result might prove irresistible.

SIMPLE LOGIC

The thesis, first stated last year by *The New Republic*, is that colleges are being less than honest about why they abolish requirements that applicants submit their SAT scores. Behind the rhetoric about "enhancing diversity" and creating a more "holistic approach" to admissions, the theory goes, many colleges "go optional" on the SAT to improve their rankings. The logic is rather simple. At an SAT-optional college, students with higher scores are far more likely to submit them, raising the institution's mean SAT score and hence the heavily test-influenced rankings.

Additionally, more students will apply to an SAT-optional college, and thus a lower percentage will be admitted, increasing its "selectivity rating."

"People will do what they have to do to stack the deck," explains John Maguire, an admissions consultant and former admissions director at Boston College.

Not that anyone admits to it, of course. It's those *other* colleges that do it "It's a nervous topic," concedes an admissions director at a large Midwestern university, asking not to be named. "Nobody wants to be accused of picking on people."

AN URBAN LEGEND?

The cunning scheme seems so perfect that it has quickly taken on the character of an urban legend in some admissions circles, its truth rarely questioned.

The relationship between going optional and improving a college's average test score is unquestionable. Almost a decade ago, when Ann Wright was an admissions dean at a Northeastern liberal-arts college, she sought a consultant's advice on how to increase the college's mean SAT score. "He told me that if we were really interested in raising our SAT's, we should make our scores optional," says Ms Wright, now vice president for enrollment at Rice University

The link between going optional and rising in the rankings is not so clear. What is amazing, given how often they complain about the seemingly mystical formulas that constitute the rankings, is how many admissions directors buy in to the quick-fix idea.

The *New Republic* article noted that in 1996, Pennsylvania's Muhlenberg College went optional and catapulted itself from the third tier to the second in the *U.S. News* rankings of liberal-arts colleges. That is true. But what the article did not say is that Muhlenberg reports an "all-inclusive profile" of its students' scores, requiring those applicants who did not originally submit scores to do so after they enroll and counting the results in its overall tally Christopher Hooker-Haring, dean of admissions and financial aid, cites the usual reasons for going optional—the ability to "coach" to the test and the disproportionately lower scores among some minority groups, for example—but emphatically states that "the rankings had absolutely nothing to do with our decision."

Other colleges cited in the article, including Dickinson and Franklin & Marshall, may regret going optional, if a rankings boost was their true aim Franklin & Marshall went optional in 1990, when its rank was 27th among liberal-arts colleges, and its listing has been lower ever since. It is now 36th Dickinson was 40th when it went optional, in 1995. Since then, its ranking has dipped below that every year but one. It is now 44th

'THEY'RE KIDDING THEMSELVES'

Robert Morse, director of data research for the *U.S. News* rankings, explains that many admissions deans use gimmicks to improve their ratings without understanding how the list works. "If these are the same admissions deans who think that going early decision will improve their yield, and advance them in the rankings, their level of information is just irresponsible. They're certainly kidding themselves if they think that going SAT-optional alone will move them in the rankings."

One reason is that factors in the rankings sometimes work at cross purposes A college could go optional on the SAT but find that its retention rate suffers because of lower-caliber students. And despite what many academics think, it is very difficult to move far in the rankings, Mr. Morse says A college would have to improve 40 percentage points in yield—the proportion of admitted applicants who actually enroll—in order to move more than one spot in the rankings by yield

"I get the impression that it takes a stick of dynamite and whole lot of money to move in the rankings," says Union's Mr. Lundquist

But that doesn't mean more colleges won't try In the end, the scheme may say more about the insanely competitive world of university admissions than about either the SAT or the rankings.

"It's one of those soft-underbelly issues," says the president of a liberal-arts college, who continues to doubt the motives of colleagues who go optional "The market considerations are more pronounced than they once were, and we might not be as noble as we'd like to think." ■

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put this extra care and effort into reading every application," says Pamela Burnett, the university's director of undergraduate admissions

The College Board, which has long urged colleges not to rely too heavily on the SAT, supports the UC system's proposed move to a fuller review—for reasons that are not entirely altruistic. "If UC goes for comprehensive review, there's less pressure to do away with the SAT," says the board's Mr. Camara. The SAT would become just one of many tools in evaluating applicants, he says

But Robert Laird, a former undergraduate-admissions director at Berkeley, wonders whether the practice of reading every application will become widespread at large public institutions, given the cost involved.

"As state budgets across the country shrink sharply, it's going to be difficult to generate the legislative and institutional financial support to put significantly more money into the undergraduate admissions process," he says.

The 'X-Percent' Plans

IN THE LATE 1990S, some states facing bans on affirmative action discovered a cheaper way to ensure that their public campuses remained racially diverse. California, Florida, and Texas now automatically admit large numbers of students based solely on class rank, essentially making SAT scores irrelevant Texas' public colleges began guaranteeing spots for the top 10 percent of the state's high-school classes in 1997, and California and Florida followed in 1999, holding slots for the top 4 percent and 20 percent, respectively. The policies take advantage of the many high schools that are predominantly black or Hispanic.

Now, the University of Texas at Austin is considering whether the SAT is even worth requiring for the half of the freshman class not automatically admitted under the state's 10-percent policy. A faculty committee convened by the university's president, Larry R. Faulkner, started meeting last month to study the fairness of standardized tests in Austin's admissions process.

The trend toward "x-percent plans" and more-subjective admissions policies hasn't escaped the gaze of those who uphold high standards or oppose racial preferences. Michael McIntyre, a professor of organizational and industrial psychology at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville who has studied the SAT, says that if the goal at the University of California is to maintain diversity, officials should be honest about their motives "A change in policy is very likely to change the demographic mix," Mr. McIntyre says "If that's the goal of the the change, then let's be upfront about it. Let's admit it if we are trying to achieve some social end, rather than an academic end."

Mr. Lemann, the author, supports affirmative action, but cautions that college officials may be fooling themselves if they think a subjective admissions process will shield them from lawsuits He says that legal groups leading the fight against racial preferences, like the Center for Individual Rights, would have a more difficult time proving that such policies discriminate against white students, but in some cases would still be able to do so "The Center for Individual Rights has gone after the low-hanging fruit," Mr. Lemann says, "and there's a lot of it."

The College Board and ETS, meanwhile, occupy a strange position in the affirmative-action debate. Both are firmly within the academic establishment, which strongly defends the use of racial preferences in admissions. The College Board is a membership organization that represents colleges and schools. ETS, meanwhile, lures top researchers, in part, by providing college-like surroundings on its verdant 360-acre campus outside Princeton, N J Partly because of the scrutiny of affirmative action, both groups have counseled colleges to avoid relying too heavily on test scores.

But now that some colleges are not even considering the SAT in admitting large portions of their students, the traditional alliances may be breaking down Mr. Landgraf, the ETS president, for example, views the "x-percent plans" as a blow to high standards, even though they are a handy tool for maintaining black and Hispanic enrollments "Are the interests of the states best served by silencing the debate,' Mr. Landgraf asks, "or by doing what's right"

Narrowing the Gap

MR. LANDGRAF and nearly everyone else agree that the best way to end the debate would be to eliminate the performance gap between students of different races. Most of those who use the x-percent plans admit privately that they would go back to the SAT in a minute, were it not for those racial gaps. But despite con-

siderable hand-wringing, and efforts at outreach, the gaps between white, black, and Hispanic students have barely budged in more than a decade.

The College Board sponsors a good deal of research aimed at broadening the scope of skills measured by the SAT, and much of that work has the secondary goal of finding measurements upon which black and Hispanic students will score well.

Robert Sternberg, a Yale University psychology professor who believes the SAT should be expanded to measure creative and practical skills, is among the most prominent scholars receiving funds from the board. To measure creativity, Mr Sternberg suggests showing students a single-frame cartoon and asking them to write a caption for it. To measure practical ability or common sense, he would include a reading about a real-life dilemma that teenagers might face, and ask students to identify the best way to handle the situation

Mr. Sternberg acknowledges that grading the answers would be more expensive than it is now, particularly on the creative questions, a machine would not be able to do the job But the College Board could hire readers, as it does to grade essays on Advanced Placement tests. The readers would use examples that would illustrate what types of captions might earn top scores for creativity.

"By measuring a broader range of abilities, you would no longer need affirmative action," Mr. Sternberg says. "Some of the kids who grow up in culturally different environments have to develop creative and practical skills to survive If you grow up in a white, upper-middle-class environment, you don't need those skills as much."

He and a team of researchers are conducting a study that involves roughly 1,000 college students at 16 sites. "So far, our results are in line with our hypothesis—that we can find better ways of predicting success," he says.

Those sorts of measures generally draw howls of protest from critics of affirmative action, and many of the psychometricians involved in creating the SAT are equally dubious.

"I'd be a little concerned that you could coach someone to pretend to be creative," says Thomas Van Essen, who develops verbal tests at ETS. "Think of those kids you knew in high school who were 'creative'--they all acted the same."

The testing giant's own efforts to narrow the gap in test scores have elicited similar skepticism. In 1999, ETS officials revealed that they were working on a project that would help admissions officers measure disadvantage, by identifying as a "striver" any student who scored more than 200 points above the average score of students from a similar background The scale took into account 14 variables, such as family income and parents' education, but its developers noted that the only way to achieve "a student body that mirrors the racial composition of the U S population" was to use race in the process.

The effort was excoriated by opponents of affirmative action, and quickly condemned by Mr Caperton. Last month in Princeton, a table of six ETS officials briefly fell silent when the topic was broached.

"We didn't feel there was sufficient technical quality behind it," says Drew H. Gitomer, senior vice president for statistics and research "While the intent of the study was noble, we didn't feel there was a whole lot there "

Meanwhile, the College Board's efforts to deal with its other problem—the perception that the SAT has no link to the curriculum—can best be described as modest. For years, it reacted mainly with semantics In 1994, it changed the name "Scholastic Aptitude Test" to "Scholastic Assessment Test," to suggest a measurement of educational accomplishment rather than innate ability A few years later, it shortened the name to just "SAT "

'An Evolving SAT'

COLLEGE BOARD OFFICIALS insist that the test has responded to changes in the curriculum over time. They note that they began permitting calculators on the math exam in 1994, to reflect the practice of many schools The same year, they killed a section of questions on antonyms, to answer critics who suggested that it was encouraging schools to spend too much time on vocabulary devoid of context.

Similar criticisms are now being leveled at the analogies section, and the College Board is studying whether it would be feasible to replace that part with questions on a short, high-level reading passage.

"The notion that this test hasn't changed in 50 years is completely untrue," says Amy Schmidt, the College Board's director of higher-education research and educational evaluation.

Somewhat belatedly, the board is also beginning to help test takers figure out what skills they need to improve to raise their scores. This fall, for the first time, the board is sending score reports to students who have taken the PSAT, which high-school sophomores and juniors take as a warm-up to the SAT

The reports list specific skills that each student needs to work on— such as understanding the main ideas of a reading passage, or applying the rules of algebra and geometry There are no immediate plans to provide such reports to students who take the SAT

"Maybe we could have done a little better job over the years of communicating what these questions do measure," concedes Mr. Gitomer

Whether those efforts will be enough to save the SAT remains to be seen. The best hope for the test may be that it's so entrenched in the admissions process

Mr Conley, the advocate for state tests, doesn't expect them to be required on college applications anytime soon "The college-admissions process is a conservative system, and we're talking about a brand-new infrastructure that doesn't exist," he says. "It's like setting a massive ship off in a different direction, and that's never easy or quick "

When a committee studying whether to eliminate the SAT requirement at the University of Texas first met last month, several professors wondered what would replace the test if its use were abolished. They feared that a process without standardized tests would lead to inconsistent admissions decisions

The SAT is still required at the highly selective public colleges that give every application a thorough read John A. Blackburn, Virginia's dean of admissions, says the university does not plan to drop the requirement

"In a major system, where you have to make decisions about a lot of people and where you re responsible to the public, you must have some norm that cuts across high schools," Mr Blackburn says. "Until we have something better, the SAT is really the only instrument that achieves that."

Andrew Brownstein and Eric Hoover contributed to this article.

AP/WIDE WORLD

Richard C. Atkinson, president of the U. of California, delivered a serious blow to the SAT when he proposed replacing it in the system's admissions process.

Can the SAT Measure Common Sense?

Robert Sternberg, a Yale University psychology professor, believes the SAT should be expanded to measure practical abilities, such as knowing how to get along with others. Here's an example of how such a question might be worded.

You are enrolled in a class you are not excited about, but you do care about your grade and, so far, you have been doing fine. The class has a short paper due tomorrow. You have been putting off working on this paper because writing will bore you. You have been planning to work on it tonight, but you just received a phone call from your friend who wants you to go to this really cool party. You have heard about the people who are throwing the party, but you have never met them. You'd love to go. Given this situation, rate the quality of the following options:

1. Extremely bad	2. Very bad	3. Somewhat bad	4. Neither bad nor good	5. Somewhat good	6. Very good	7. Extremely good

__a) Get the address of the party from your friend, get your paper done quickly, and show up at the party later than everybody else.

__b) Go with your friend, meet the people, and leave in an hour or so to get your paper done.

__c) Go with your friend and see how you like it there; make your decision regarding the paper on the spot.

__d) Explain to your friend that you cannot go because you have a paper due.

__e) Go, enjoy yourself, and then stay up all night to work on the paper.

__f) Go to the party and then come up with an excuse so that you can get permission to turn the paper in late.

__g) Go, stay for a couple of hours, sleep for a couple of hours, then get up really early to write the paper.

__h) Get the address of the party from your friend, tell him/her that you'll be there, and then never show up (get your paper done).

Answers (based on experts):
a: 4 b: 4 c: 2 d: 6 e: 3 f: 1 g: 4 h: 6

SOURCE: ROBERT STERNBERG, YALE UNIVERSITY