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ACROSS THE NATION

Corporate Leaders Decry Emphasis on SATs

By John Gehring
Washington

Corporate executives from Sears Roebuck and Co., Verizon Communications, Bank of America, and other high-profile companies have sent a strongly worded letter urging college and university presidents to stop overemphasizing tests such as the SAT in admissions decisions.

Released here last week at a press conference held by the National Urban League, the letter will be sent to more than 700 colleges and universities. While the letter doesn't call for dropping the SAT, it argues that an emphasis on college-entrance tests is harming American education.

"We are writing to urge you to stop the overreliance on college-entrance exams and to use admission tools that better measure the qualities that truly point to a student's potential for achieving future success within—and beyond—the classroom," the executives tell the college presidents. "As many studies have shown, 'gatekeeper' tests are an inadequate and unreliable predictor of future prosperity and productivity in life."

The Urban League also released results at the April 12 event from a random survey of 200 corporate executives from Fortune 1000 companies that show those business leaders value character, leadership abilities, and effective communication much more than test scores, grades, or advanced degrees when determining employees' potential.

The letter and the survey follow a February proposal by Richard C. Atkinson, the president of the

Business Leaders' Views on Education

Asked how important the following aspects of education are to long-term success in business, both top and second-tier executives downplayed the value of standardized-test scores, according to a poll of business leaders conducted for the National Urban League. Percentages shown are of those who thought attribute was "extremely important."

	Total percent	Top executives	2nd-tier executives
Having advanced degrees	23	19	26
Taking a lot of business courses, getting an MBA and the like	23	22	24
Grades in college and graduate school	20	22	17
Taking a liberal arts curriculum	18	16	20
Going to a highly selective school, such as an Ivy League or U.S. News & World Report top 25 school	12	12	12
Standardized test scores, such as SATs, ACTs, Achievement Tests etc.	5	5	5

SOURCE: National Urban League, Institute for Opportunity and Excellence

University of California system, to eliminate SAT I scores as a requirement for admission to the 170,000-student system. (See *Education Week*, Feb. 28, 2001.)

Mr. Atkinson said an overemphasis on standardized admissions exams had led to the "educational equivalent of a nuclear arms race."

The proposal from Mr. Atkinson to require only standardized tests that assess mastery of specific subjects, such as the SAT II, touched off a wave of discussions. Some 1.3 million college-bound high school seniors took the SAT last year.

Hugh B. Price, the president of the New York City-based National Urban League, contended that the attention paid to the standardized entrance exams leaves many well-qualified students out of the selection pool. As affirmative action has been scaled back at public universities, he said, African-American students and other mi-

nority applicants have been disproportionately affected by an overreliance on test scores.

"Corporate America has much to teach colleges and universities about what merit means in the real world," said Mr. Price, who sits on the board of the Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT for the College Board.

Character Counts

The National Urban League's Institute for Opportunity and Excellence, with funding from Nationwide Insurance, last fall commissioned DYG Inc., a Danbury, Conn., social- and market-research firm, to interview 200 corporate leaders about what attributes were most crucial for long-term business success and to understand the weight those leaders place on test scores.

One hundred presidents, chief executive officers, and chairmen,

along with 100 "next-generation executives"—senior vice presidents and others—were interviewed for the survey.

Results show that character—integrity, the ability to overcome obstacles, and a willingness to admit being wrong—is the characteristic most cited by business leaders as needed for success. Communication and leadership skills followed. Overall, only 4 percent said standardized-test scores, such as the SAT and ACT entrance exams, were extremely important to business success.

Chiara Coletti, a vice president for public affairs at the New York City-based College Board, said her organization shares the view that colleges should use SAT scores in conjunction with other measures.

"We support the Urban League's educational-equity goals, and we advocate a balanced admissions policy," Ms. Coletti said. "We applaud their support of a holistic approach."