SAT: the sacred cow of higher education

The University of California's decision to drop the SAT as a criterion for admission is a great leap forward in combating institutional racism. This momentous decision removes a racially tainted barrier to higher education, and it puts pressure on public and private schools to equalize educational opportunity.

Disquiet with the SAT stems from a lack of clarity of what it measures. Originally named the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the SAT was created along the lines of an intelligence test. It was designed not to assess what people knew, but a vaguely defined notion of intellectual capacity or raw ability.

But because intellectual capacity is virtually unlimited for nearly everyone, and because the SAT attempts to make predictions based on past learning, the SAT was properly viewed as incapable of assessing capacity and renamed the Scholastic Achievement Test.

Educators quickly realized, however, that the origins of the SAT in the intelligence test movement meant that many of the questions on the SAT were not based on material taught in K-12, but engaged the more ethereal realm of reasoning and problem solving. The makers of the SAT therefore changed the name of the test again to, simply, The SAT.

The University of California correctly realizes that the test is inappropriate for college admissions for two main reasons: It produces large and persistent group differences tied to race, sex and class, and it assesses material not taught in high schools. They have therefore asked test makers to develop an instrument that is more directly tied to the content of high school curricula. This noble idea, sadly, is doomed to perpetuate the race, class and sex biases of the SAT unless something is done to equalize educational opportunity, something that may never hap-

America has hundreds of years of experience in public and private education. For each of those years, we have practiced a form of educational apartheid. Beginning with the explicit mandates of segregation in public schools, continuing with the 1954 Supreme Court decision that ordered school desegregation, following up with the hotly contested busing, and reflected in today's de facto segregation and structured inequality, primary and secondary school education is anything but equal.

This unevenness in the playing field of educational opportunity will be reflected in UC's proposed new test because schools are not created equal. Indeed, grotesque disparities exist in the quality of secondary school education, and these disparities disadvantage those groups already disadvantaged: African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, Native Americans and the poor.

Social scientists have identified several types of racism and each is reflected in the content, process and outcomes of standardized testing. Individual racism is reinforced because SAT scores contribute to the idea that certain groups are less capable than others. Cultural racism is reflected test questions that are grounded in the majority culture. Scientific racism is promoted by scholars who use the scores to support theories of a biologically determined racial hierarchy. Institutional racism is manifested in the policies and practices that disadvantage members of various racial groups.

When the SAT, or any standardized test that produces large racial differences, is used as a criterion for college admission, institutional racism is unavoidable. No amount of corrective action can mitigate the biasing effects in the admissions offices of American colleges and universities until large strides have been made in equalizing educational opportunity in primary and secondary schooling.

In putting forth a resolution to ban the use of the SAT at the college where I teach, I have met curiously strong resistance from many faculty, staff and students. It seems nearly impossible to change attitudes about the SAT through rational debate. The SAT is the sacred cow of American higher education.

Critics of the proposed ban fail to see that the use of the SAT is akin to the literacy tests that blocked the votes of African Americans in the old South. They are blind to the discrepancy in our words and deeds: We profess social responsibility, but we practice exclusion.

Although the solution proposed by the University of California is fraught with many of the difficulties of the SAT, their debate provides optimism that one day the playing field will be leveled by equalizing educational opportunities in K-12. When that day comes, all groups will be able to demonstrate merit by assessing their mastery of material that they have been taught.

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