

Use of SAT I 'Compromises Education System' Says UC President

April 22, 2001

Remember the analogical reasoning section from the SAT ? Try this one:

Mauritania is to Dodo bird as The University of California is to _____

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| A. Albatross | C. SAT I |
| B. Palm trees | D. SETI |

As of 2003, the correct answer could be “C,” if a proposal by University of California President Richard C. Atkinson is adopted.

In his February 18 speech to the American Council on Education, Atkinson recommended that the University of California no longer require the SAT I for admission to the university system. Instead, he advised the UC schools to rely on the SAT II, grade point average, activity records, and other, more “holistic” measures of students’ achievement.

The SAT I is offered by the College Board as a test of developed reasoning ability, although it was originally viewed as a basic aptitude test.

The SAT II, on the other hand, tests students on specific subjects, such as writing, sciences, foreign languages, and mathematics. Both SATs are owned by the College Board, and administered by the Educational Testing Service. Atkinson, a Fellow and Charter Member of APS, expressed doubts about the SAT I’s ability to predict college performance, but the bulk of his argument for rejecting the SAT I pointed to its unintended side-effects. One of these side-effects is the large amount of class time and resources invested in preparing for the SAT I. Another is the popular perception of the test as unfair, especially for minorities. Most troubling to Atkinson was how the SAT I “can have a devastating impact on the self-esteem and aspirations of young students.”

MIXED REACTIONS

Psychological scientists’ reactions to Atkinson’s proposal have been mixed. Some, like Claude Steele of Stanford University, agree that “a shift from the SAT I to the SAT II could establish better contingencies for students, by encouraging students to spend more time reading history and biology, and less time on SAT prep courses.”

Steele, a former member of the APS Board of Directors, notes that “The SAT’s original mission was to be an assessment of college potential that was not dependent on high school curricula or socioeconomic background. Over the years, however, evidence for the SAT I’s ability to perform this mission has become ambiguous.”

“Scores do seem to respond to the quality of high school curriculum,” Steele said. “Scores do seem to reflect socioeconomic background. And coaching does seem to make a difference, since the College Board itself now offers test prep courses. Also, our research raises some concern about possible biases against minorities and women-biases in the testing context, more than in item content.”

APS Charter Member Howard Everson, the College Board’s vice president for academic initiatives and chief research scientist, agrees that the SAT I may reflect socioeconomic and minority status, “but so do grades, high school curricula, extracurricular opportunities, and all other factors in an admission application.”

“There’s no way the people who create the test can control the learning and testing environments in which the students find themselves,” Everson said. “Yet we do our best to minimize these group differences on the SAT I through statistical quality assurance.”

Everson asserts further that the SAT I’s benefits outweigh its drawbacks. “The SAT I is extremely useful for high schools, colleges and universities, and for the students themselves. It elevates high school standards for the teaching of critical thinking and analogical reasoning. It gives the admissions and faculty at our nation’s universities and colleges a very good indicator of who is ready to take advantage of a college education. And it creates a more level playing field for students. For these reasons, we don’t think there is an inordinate amount of time spent in preparing kids for these high-stakes tests.”

Atkinson acknowledged that “standardized tests can help students gauge their progress and help the general public assess the effectiveness of schools.” Regarding the SAT I, however, he concluded that “America’s emphasis on the SAT is compromising our educational system.”

Atkinson’s proposal must be approved by the faculty senate and the University of California Board of Regents before the SAT I is no longer required for admission to UC schools. In the meantime, his proposal is reverberating throughout higher education, with other state systems and private colleges and universities facing possible pressure to follow California’s lead on this issue.