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March 29, 2014

### **Standardized Testing: Controversy and Alternatives**

For every prospective student looking ahead to seek higher education, there is a major obstacle that could hinder one's chances of obtaining college acceptance without being judged on criteria unrelated to reputedly measured academic abilities. This obstacle, which is dealt by students all across the United States, is standardized testing. Standardized testing is the academic practice of administering an exam with consistent questions to a large number of students across many regions. Proponents of the test say that "[they] are a fair and objective measure of student achievement," a stance that is widely upheld by an overwhelming majority of U.S. colleges and universities. Opponents including teachers and some high education administrators claim that administering the tests yields a number of negative impacts in addition to being statistically and unfairly irrelevant towards the exposure of traditional learning curricula. Standardized testing is a controversial academic practice for reasons including but not limited to teachers focusing on teaching to a test, the undermining of having students think innovatively and critically and the adverse effects on students from the pressure of attaining high scores. As a result of these problems, experts promote alternative methods including performance exams and portfolio-based assessments, and meeting graduation exit standards. ("Standardized Tests"; Flannigan, Dawn, et al., "Standardized Testing.")

Looking at the simple definition of standardized testing, it comes to no surprise that some schools have resorted to order its teachers to structure their classes around a particular

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test (i.e. the SATs and/or ACTs). Since some standardized tests cover the same topics, theoretically, having a curriculum solely devoted to them would cater well to test-takers. However, when analyzing this scenario carefully, one must consider the number of disadvantages that may and can arise from having teachers teach to a test. By enforcing a curriculum dedicated to the subjects covered by a test, there would be a limit imposed on what is to be and not to be taught. This becomes problematic; high school exams such as the SAT and ACT only cover topics in Math, English and Science (including its branches, i.e. reading/writing in English). As subjects including social studies and foreign languages are not tested, they become eschewed in favor of heavy emphasis on courses that students must pass in order to gain entrance to college. Furthermore, even with the presence of Math, English and Science, standardized tests only cover a certain range within each subject. For example, college entrance exams only test arithmetic, algebraic and geometric concepts for math. This means that higher and more advanced courses including trigonometry and calculus and alternative classes such as statistics are left untaught, a direct result of having a narrow curriculum instead of one that covers more topics. (“Standardized Tests”)

There are two negative impacts that can be illustrated as a result of having a school administer a pro-standardized curriculum. Firstly, by leaving out subjects including history, foreign language and the creative arts, the opportunity for a student to be creative and innovative would not be present. If all a student focuses on is mathematical formulas and grammar rules, how could they learn more (if any?) about the world around them or the careers that exist other than the ones pertaining to math or science? Even with English and its importance of proficiency on grammar and comprehension, having a standardized test to determine this kills one’s potential in showing their strengths in being creative writers.

Secondly, by having students (who do intend to major in math and science careers) learn in a pro-standardized curriculum, the opportunity for learning more advanced and/or miscellaneous topics is limited. To put it into perspective, high school students must take the SATs/ACTs as early as the 11th grade; and some may either take either tests or one test twice for a chance of obtaining a high score. This means that by the 12th grade, students would have had 3 years of subjects that minimalize on non-standardized topics which is not good. Essentially, if a prospective high school graduate was to not cover topics from a diverse and advanced curriculum, they would be put at a disadvantage. For one thing, colleges look at the quality and quantity of courses taken by an applicant and for another, it is not only generally anticipated that one takes advanced classes but in some cases required to do so as it helps with one to transition into introductory courses in college. (“Standardized Tests”)

Perhaps the one of the more controversial issues in standardized testing pertains to pressure. The stress that is associated with taking a test and anticipating the results is widespread in the U.S. However, what makes taking a standardized test more cringe-worthy than a regular test issued regularly by a school? For one thing, standardized tests are labeled as unfair to students whose first language is not English and most ethnic minorities. Given the fact that the administrators of the test (usually the ETS) aren't lax about students being given extra time or accommodations to make up for the lack in English mastery, stress would especially be unavoidable here. But the number one major cause of pressure with regards to standardized testing relates to being competitive in the college admission process. As a majority of colleges nationwide refuse to accept anyone without an SAT or ACT score, it is nearly unavoidable to take the test. But what adds more stress is the range of scores each college has; the more selective colleges require students to attain high scores whereas the

more open ones admit students with lower scores. For students with hopes of getting into a college of their dreams (while some equipped with the proper academic attributes), the stress for them to meet standardized test requirements puts a strain on their focus for achieving those required results. (“Standardized Tests”)

Due to decades of controversy being arisen from the negative effects of standardized testing, schools nationwide have devised solutions that could counter them. Among these solutions are performance exams. Performance exams, in strict sense, test a student’s knowledge among a range of subjects that have been covered within a specific year. Furthermore, unlike standardized tests, performance exams are not devised in a way where questions have to be mostly multiple choice so that a machine can easily correct them. Among the types of performance exams students take are criterion based and teacher made. Criterion based tests “evaluate the accomplishment of specifically stated instructional objectives.” and evaluates a student’s performance in terms of other students within the same grouping. This is done to identify students who struggle with the material presented and gives teachers a heads up to plan for improving one’s test taking capability based on weakness per subject area (among many subjects). Another type of performance exam is the teacher made test. This test is essentially a criterion based exam but differs in that it measures a student’s mastery of a material. Therefore, contrary to how standardized tests are devised, teacher made exams ensure a student’s level of proficiency in a specific set of areas without having the need to cover very few topics and in a wordily confusing manner. (Wildemuth, 1-3)

Other than the widespread usage of proficiency exams, other alternatives to standardized testing pertaining to a non-exam format exist. One such alternative is a student’s portfolio assessment. A portfolio assessment gives a student the chance to demonstrate their

best work in a number of subjects spanning years of progress. Examples of work a student may and can document include samples of oral reading, results of reading interviews, scientific experiment write-ups, formal analysis papers (science and social science), and vice versa. In short, the goal here is to create a holistic analysis of a student's academic capability and established knowledge via demonstrated experience which can accurately and more fairly showcase one's potential of success upon entering college. Along the same lines, many schools and educational institutions have firmly established exit standards for their students to adhere to for graduation purposes. The advantage of having this in place is twofold; while schools are often permitted to have exit standards because it is mandated by a governing power (to make sure graduates are academically prepared for college), it is also important to have for giving students closure with what they need to do and how doing so can reflect greatly upon college entry. For example, exit standards may or may not include a non-academic element (i.e. volunteer work, extracurricular involvement) where students participating in such helps them to develop into well-rounded individuals, talent wise. This is important to note as colleges and universities look highly upon student involvement in activities and in some cases, weighs more heavily than perfect SATs scores and/or GPAs.

Dawn, et al., "Standardized Testing.")

It is without doubt that standardized exams have earned its controversial reputation in the spectrum of academic testing. If the essential format of these types of tests serve to measure the achievement that is relative to each test-taker in a manner that both promotes the learning of limited topics and forces a student to comply to finding answers quantitatively (rather than qualitatively), then there is much to be improved on to reflect such achievement properly. As alternatives to standardized tests have existed and continue to be used in school

systems to showcase established student work and talent, the fight to undermine tests such as the SAT is ongoing. For instance, a number of schools in the U.S. have joined an “SAT-optional” movement where the admittance of college students no longer requires one to have taken the test; however, these (mostly liberal) colleges are typically ranked low by major college ranking publications. Although a controversial topic on its own, one of the major factors towards a college’s rank is its expectance on having applicants demonstrate high standardized test scores. Meanwhile, the makers of the SAT announced their most recent revision of the test (to take place during the 2016 academic year) to put more emphasis on skills most essential for college (i.e. the omission of rare vocabulary words). In spite of these changes, there is no doubt that colleges are seriously looking for educated individuals whose academic skills say more than what is shown on a test sheet. At least in today’s world, having the proper mixture of education and talent should suffice for college admittance, a measure of previous experience and future potential that not even exams read by machines can interpret. (Lewin, Tamar. “A New SAT Aims to Realign With Schoolwork.”)

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