

The History and Evolution of Standardized Testing:
From Formation to Alteration

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ENG 3006, Section 3

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May 21, 2014

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Can academic knowledge be tested, both en masse and with a purpose? History has definitely shown that civilizations practice this idea with the intention of effectively grading students on their amount of knowledge learned. As with any idea, however, flaws do exist alongside criticism and concerns regarding exam structure. In response to this, different variations of exams have existed and most even have evolved to appeal to expectations. Nonetheless, the importance of testing to large numbers of students—many of whom comprise various backgrounds, both ethnically and cognitively—has remained relevant for centuries to the point where controversy has been brought up with regards to the effects the exams bring to these groups. To understand the significance of how standardized tests are controversial in the academic world, one must delve into the beginnings of how the test was first devised. What was the purpose? What led to its creation? In addition, one must also understand how the concept of standardized tests changed over time. What warranted the change in format of tests such as the SAT? Knowing the causes provides insight into what arguments and opinions are made which ultimately leads into the controversy surrounding standardized testing to begin with.

The origin of standardized testing goes as far back as China, during the time of dynasties, where elements of their use were utilized in some way. At the time and exclusively in that society, uniformly based tests were administered for people looking to seek government jobs. Passing the test required one to know Confucian philosophy and poetry very accurately. Similar

to China, Greece also administered similar exams but usually in essay format as it adhered better to the Socratic method of learning (Dan, 2009). Fast-forwarding to the nineteenth century, at the time of the Industrial Revolution, the need for an exam to test large numbers of students quickly and efficiently rose as school attendance skyrocketed due to the decreasing need of having kids working in farms and factories

In 1905, French psychologist Alfred Binet started to develop a precursor to the modern IQ test; this is noteworthy in that the theory behind creating an exam to test intelligence would later become the basis for future standardized testing. Perhaps one of the earliest examples of this was first achieved during World War I. Aptitude tests called Army Mental Tests were conducted to assign U.S. servicemen appropriate jobs to properly strengthen the war effort (Dan, 2009). Test grading was done manually, which took up valuable time to efficiently and readily assign servicemen to their positions, which undermined the purpose of having a standardized test for mass assessment. A solution was soon developed in order to counter this problem.

In 1936, the first automatic test scanner called the IBM 805 was introduced. This early computing technology allowed for the detection of marks made on a test via an electric current which eventually gave away for the use of incorporating bubbles in a multiple choice format for questions (Dan, 2009). Not only did the scanner automatically correct test booklets, but it did so in very large numbers, thus making standardized tests easier to administer where as a result, their use rose dramatically. Among the earliest and most prominent of the standardized tests in the U.S. was the SAT, standing for Scholastic Aptitude Test. First administered in 1926 by the College Board, the original incarnation was 90 minutes long and had 315 questions testing on vocabulary and basic mathematics (Dan, 2009). With the advent of scanning machines, the test

grew, and by the end of World War II, the SAT was accepted as an entrance requirement from widespread colleges and universities across the country so that it became the norm it is today (primarily from higher tier and Ivy League schools) (Tamar, 2014).

Throughout the existence of educational standardized testing in the United States, criticism and even controversy have brewed from a number of issues the exams have raised. One of the earliest issues concerned the emphasis on only math and grammar subjects as opposed to science, history and other general topics. Although math and grammar were and still are to an extent critical for testing cognitive abilities, the pressure for having an exam test for strengths and weaknesses for where an individual's interests lie formed the basis for a standardized test called the ACT, standing for American College Testing (Tamar, 2014). The ACT, which was developed in 1959, not only expanded the range of topics that students can test for but also made more effort in assessing where a test-taker's interests lie career-wise (Dan, 2009).

The ACT was developed by Everett Franklin Lindquist, a professor from the University of Iowa who would later create the GED test, an exam which acts as an alternative to a diploma for those who didn't graduate high school. The GED test was originally designed for war veterans who did not complete their education originally but wanted to do so for seeking a career post-war (Dan, 2009). Today, the test caters to thousands of students in the U.S. annually to high school drop-outs not usually interested in advancing to college. Due to this structure, it is an alternative to the SAT and ACT but caters to a different audience.

Contributing further to the evolution of standardized testing were numerous changes to the format of the tests due to factors such as competing standardized tests and rising number of

alternatives to the test. In order for the SAT to compete with the ACT, for instance, SAT IIs were introduced to test students on particular subject areas (i.e. biology, geography). The main test itself has changed its format subtly over the course of a few decades, but in 2005, the SAT significantly altered its scoring scale and added a new section (writing) to emphasize more on language mastery (Tamar, 2014). Furthermore, another form of standardized testing called advanced placement (AP) exams were introduced in the 1950s (Dan, 2009). These tests gave students in high school the opportunity to earn credit for introductory college classes. The areas of examination vary just like the ACT and even act as an indication for college preparedness given their presumed path of interest. Students taking the AP exams would still have to take either of the SAT or ACT to get into college but the assumption here is that they are prepared for the level of rigor the tests have.

Overall, by analyzing the history and evolution of standardized testing, the focus on how the tests have their pros and cons (as well as support behind both sides) becomes clearer. While the history the practice provides insight on how and why implementing a method of common testing is beneficial for educational structure (one of the main argument for the pro side), the evolution sheds light on the response to criticism and change, led by the opposition side. Understanding this debate ultimately comes from knowing the background each side and how one can illustrate why someone from the affirmative side will argue pro-standardized and vice versa. Oftentimes, arguing for or against an issue such as standardized testing is made more effective knowing where each side is coming from in order to prevent situations where one will argue without being supportive or reconciliatory of the opposing side. Even compromise can be helped or even spurred from knowing the background because it establishes a willingness to go

forward instead of remain on one side (resolution-wise, not opinion-wise unless persuaded to change views).

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