

Affirmative or Against:

Analyzing the Pros and Cons of Standardized Testing

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### Abstract

As subsequently written, this research paper takes an in-depth look at an issue at the center of much controversy in the academic spectrum: standardized testing. In analyzing this controversy, arguments from the affirmative and opposition sides will be discussed, separately at length. Before delving into this, a brief but descriptive background on the topic is provided to help readers obtain knowledge on how the tests first originated and evolved over time, which sets the stage for the arguments. In addition, a rebuttal section will follow these sections that will provide further insight to how one side is persuasively stronger than the other, which in this case is the opposition side. The claims and counterarguments that make up the rebuttal section will help guide a reader to make their own stance on the topic provided no bias in the rebuttals which there are none. Last but not least, the paper concludes by summarizing how standardized testing is a procedure worth administrating but not without its shortcomings. These shortcomings, which will be addressed extensively in the paper, can and inevitably will make the basis for improvement of this procedure. By adhering to this format (the Classical Model of Argumentation), the goal is to educate, reiterate and persuade to a point of view that is hopefully understood by many readers. And finally, over 20+ sources were used as accordingly, not only for citation purposes but also to help make this research paper as factually consistent as possible.

### Affirmative or Against: Analyzing the Pros and Cons of Standardized Testing

For much of civilized history, acquiring an education from schooling has been practiced to further the development of an individual (or group of individuals') learning capacity of the world around them. As history progressed, schooling itself evolved—from its physical structure to its structured curriculum. However, few things remained consistent, the most notable of them concerning grading of students on their mastery of topics taught to them. Supporting this practice (and therefore, the fundamental goal of knowing if a student accurately takes in what is taught) is the administration of examinations. Although examinations have been a standard in schools for centuries, a particular kind of test has received controversy with regards to its structure, goals and methods of studying for it: the standardized test. Standardized testing is a controversial academic practice that has arguments for and against its purpose—a purpose which is held by colleges nationwide in order to systematically determine academic placement. This is a view that is widely supported by them (and other groups) but nonetheless, a method that is criticized by various educators and institutions whose stance should be given more awareness regarding today's problems with education.

Standardized testing is thought to have originated in China, where students hoping to get government jobs had to take exams testing their knowledge of Confucian philosophy and poetry (Dan, 2009). Aside from the level of rigor one would expect to observe in this scenario of testing, one noteworthy reason for why a standardized test was necessary here regarded its

effectiveness of examining large numbers of students. Essentially, all test-takers would have the same or similar questions with regards to the content of the exam, which would make for accounting results easy to collect and extrapolate from. Generations later, essays would also become part of standardized tests. The Greeks first implemented this as means to interpret creative thinking and proper grammar usage (among other skills applied to one's writing) by providing an open-ended question or prompt (Dan, 2009). At this point, one could probably get the feeling of how standardized tests were devised: emphasis was placed on testing large numbers of students by inquiring test-takers to answer questions pertaining to both a comprehensive level of analyzation (writing) and a relative knowledge of assessment (multiple choice questions).

Fastforwarding much later to the Industrial Revolution era (of both Europe and America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), the need for standardized tests skyrocketed due to the changes brought to the shifting culture dynamic of having children attend schools instead of helping their families with farm or trade related work (Dan, 2009). As a result of rising attendance in schools, standardized tests widely became adopted, later becoming integral for identifying the well learned from the deficiently learned students. Identifying students of the latter group became top priority as it effectively helped educators cater to the needs of their weaknesses per subject area; results of the tests as a whole also helped educators adjust their teaching curriculum to help reinforce ideas that were missed by certain age groups. Although this was the focus of the tests early on (it still is today to some extent), standardized tests today are most often associated with college entrance requirements.

In the U.S., an overwhelming majority of high school students will have to face the prospect of taking either the SAT or ACT, both of which are standardized tests specifically dedicated to universities looking to accept students whose scores reflect their academic rigor. Similarly, students needing to pursue graduate programs have to take the GREs. Standardized tests today are used as a reference of academic measurement for many schools and even places of employment (GEDs). Despite the wide use of these exams, standardized tests have become largely controversial since their inception in current academic culture. The reasons for the controversy vary greatly; on both sides of the argument, there are just as many arguments for why the tests should be administered as there counterarguments for how they are unfairly devised. With that said, analyzing both sides is extensive but nonetheless will provide insight to how a reader can make their own judgment on what side he or she supports the most.

Taking a look at the affirmative side of the issue, there is a lot to be said about how standardized tests are both an effective tool and even an instrumental part of the academic evaluation and learning process. Proponents of standardized testing have many arguments to back their beliefs, the first of which regards the positive effect the tests have on test-takers. According to a 2011 survey conducted by testing scholar Richard P. Phelps, “93% of studies on student testing, including the use of large-scale and high-stakes standardized tests, found a positive effect on student achievement” (Phelps, 2011). Analyzing this study, it seems that students are capable of becoming stronger thinkers and problem-solvers if repeatedly engaged with long and enduring examinations. Since standardized exams tend to cover multiple subject areas and their administration occurs after instruction of the material, their large-scale nature makes completing and passing them important to students. Earning high

marks relative to how much a student has succeeded in learning does explain the high number of them finding a positive achievement in their studies as the survey shows. This finding also undermines the use of quizzes and standard hour exams as they are mainly used to check a student's progress every once in a while.

Moving on, a second argument that proponents have for continuing the use of standardized tests relates to their reliability. To go into further detail, supporters have said that the tests objectively measure a student's achievement in a fair and unbiased manner. Without standardized tests, "policy makers would have to rely on tests scored by individual schools and teachers who have a vested interest in producing favorable results" (Phelps, 2002). This is commonly practiced by teachers who curve their class averages if their students' overall exam mean isn't up to expectations and other examples of grade inflation exist. Furthermore, the format of standardized tests is multiple-choice for the most part and scores are graded from a machine, thus ensuring no manipulation from a human grader.

A third argument that proponents for standardized tests have concerns its inclusive and non-discriminatory format. To elaborate, schools across the country (and even throughout the world), have held their responsibility in educating students with learning disabilities and of various ethnic minorities. In order to cater these students' needs, schools often will offer special exams, different in format from the ones used for everyone else. As a result, administering separate tests to groups who can benefit from them has met with controversy relating these students not taking the same test with their peers. One proponent, former Washington, D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, has argued that using alternate tests for minorities and exempting children with disabilities would be unfair to those students. Rhee goes on to say, "You can't separate [students with special needs and minorities], and try [*sic*]

to do so creates two, unequal systems, one with accountability and one without it” (Rhee, 2011). After all, students with special needs and ethnic minorities still learn the same material as their peers, which negate the need for special tests or exemptions.

A fourth argument in favor of standardized testing is its significance in highlighting the most necessary academic skills and subjects needed in high school and college. These skills and subjects encompass Mathematics, English Language Arts (ELA) and Science where the mastery of those fields hold importance for students subsequently majoring in college and thus, attaining a career. Due to standardized tests reinforcing the focus of which subjects are crucial, schools across the U.S. have adopted the “teaching to a test” model of curriculum. As it is aptly called, teaching to a test refers to a teaching curriculum that solely focuses on test-related material, whether standardized or not. By eliminating subjects (usually social studies, foreign languages and electives) deemed not important to learn career-wise (for the most part), student achievement can be raised significantly (Yeh, 2005). This in turn, would help students prepare better for exams where the content tested would mirror what was learned in the classroom.

The fifth argument that proponents stand by in this issue relates to how standardized tests produce accurate information necessary for both student and school assessment. Specifically speaking, with standardized tests having a multiple choice format, the tests’ questions require considerable thought, notes and calculations before determining a correct answer out of several choices (Mitchell, 2006). In other words, standardized tests provide objective measurement of student achievement and based on this calculated assessment, even schools benefit from this (Center for Teaching Excellence, 2011). Schools are often criticized for straying away from their curricula but also take heat from not properly focusing on the

weaknesses students' subject areas. In having a standardized test analyze a student's learning capacity, schools can use the information to restructure their focus on subjects that students need more improvement on. The result of this has shown to strengthen the academic outlook of a graduating senior. A 2002 study shows that after a surge in testing and the passing of the NCLB, 53% of college professors believed that high school graduates were ready for college, up from 33% in 1998 (where professors expected students in school to learn and retain very little information to be used for tertiary learning). (Gerstner Jr., 2002; Public Agenda, 2002)

Finally, the last major argument for pro-standardized testing concerns the effectiveness of the tests' scoring system in comparison to teachers grading exams manually. Whether looking at teachers giving out their own assessment exams to them grading their students based on class participation and perceived effort, the overall scoring of students in academic achievement has garnered criticism. Such criticism has been directed at non-cognitive outcomes and irrelevancy towards subject-matter mastery as a result of teachers not focusing on testing/grading for learned material. Furthermore, most teachers are not trained in testing and measurement which contributes to the inadequacies in grading/analyzing a student's level of mastery (Phelps, 2011). With that said, standardized tests counter these problems given how the format solely focuses on problems that require critical thinking and problem-solving, both of which can be graded by machines (multiple choice problems). Even the problems that need to be read and analyzed by human graders are most of the time done by graders that specialize in finding correct answers and awarding credit for such (usually essays and short answer questions that demonstrate work). To summarize, standardized testing positions itself as an academic tool that fairly tries to measure academic mastery in an unbiased, systematic manner.



Having established the affirmative arguments of standardized tests comes analyzing the opposing side and its differing views and opinions on why the tests are criticized and for what reasons. The first of these reasons regard how the tests have not improved student achievement. Supporting this claim is a study from 2009 that showed the effect of the No Child Left Behind (passed in 2002), where the U.S. slipped from 18th to 31st place in math in the seven years prior (Coulson, 2009). A similar drop also was noted in science but not in reading. Policymakers and educators themselves admit that standardized tests do not consistently generate positive effects on achievement and does not improve education as noted by the drop in median scores from those seven years (Walker, 2010). This of course leads into how the drop happened in the first place, a commonly cited claim being that standardized tests are an unreliable measure of student performance. Looking at a 2001 study from Brookings Institution, 50 to 80% of year-to-year test score improvements of students were temporary and was “caused by fluctuations that had nothing to do with long-term changes in learning” (Olson, 2001). Essentially, retaining knowledge that is learned during studying does not fare well long-term whereas what is learned via assignments and projects are because they involve in-depth learning which allows for better absorption of gaining knowledge.

Another commonly cited problem of standardized tests is how unfair and discriminatory they are against non-native speakers of the U.S. (or any other host country educating foreigners) and students with special needs/disabilities. This was already covered in the affirmative side of the issue where arguments favored students in those groups to adhere to the same test as their peers for reasons explained previously. However, there are counterarguments that rebut these reasons. As standardized tests are written in English, here

in the U.S., they are intended for students who have grown up learning the language and thus have mastered it on a level of fluency. If putting students whose English is their secondary (learning) language on a test that is specifically written for fluent learners, they are guaranteed to not do well (Strauss, 2011). Idioms, advanced vocabulary and even directions preceding a problem section will most certainly pose as obstacles for students of such language limitations. Students with special needs do not fare better; extra attention already is significant on their part because they learn on a different pace than that of a typical student. The timing of standardized tests also is a detriment on such students whose capacity to perform well within a time limit and without pressure would be hard to overcome.

Continuing with the arguments against administering standardized tests, another widely stated criticism is how they only measure a small portion of what makes education meaningful. Elaborating on this, Gerald W. Bracey, a late education researcher, has said, “The qualities that [standardized tests] cannot measure include creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, curiosity, endurance, reliability, enthusiasm... [etc.]” (Straus, 2011). Bracey continues to list more skills and traits that the tests do not measure but his overall message regarding this matter is how standardized tests essentially take away from what makes learning engaging and instead, does the opposite. In having standardized tests focus solely on methods of learning (i.e. memorization, quickness of solving problems) instead of the skills and behaviors needed to support and further learning, Bracey argues that the tests undermine the quality of learning. Connecting with this argument, another related issue that standardized tests bring up is teaching to the test, an idea already discussed in the affirmative side of the debate.

Teaching to a test, already a growing but controversial practice in schools, simply advocates that teachers structure their classes around a test instead of covering material outside of a test's range of subjects. A five year study completed in 2007 at the University of Maryland found that teachers were pressured to teach to a test and that as a result, a decline in the amount of time spent on covering complex assignments and engaging in higher-order thinking was observed from the low average scores of students taking regular exams (not focusing on work dedicated to standardized testing) (Jacobs, 2011). Furthermore, a 2007 U.S. study conducted by the Center of Education Policy reported that since 2001, 44% of schools had reduced time spent on science, social studies and the arts (by an average of around 2½ hours) in order to focus on reading and math (Ravitch, 2010). An effect of this change has shown in another survey where 75% of 1,250 civics, government and social studies teachers have admitted that they taught less of their lessons due to time spent on standardized tests (knightfoundation.org, 2007).

The lengthy time spent on test preparation even has interfered with time normally allotted to vacations and special events. Many schools in New York City held sessions for test practice during days off of school after the city's math and reading scores dropped in 2010 (Kolodner, 2010) and in 2002, students in Lubbock, Texas were prevented commemorating the first anniversary of September 11 attacks due to time spent for test preparation (Schemo, 2002). At this point, one may be wondering if standardized test preparation is a bit too much as it not only takes away from learning other essential material but also substantially adds more to studying, making for balancing schoolwork and life in general, harder than ever. Without a doubt, the extensive time spent on tests has caused stress in students, even severe in some cases. Whether it is anecdotes that illustrate "how testing produces gripping anxiety

in even the brightest of students, and makes young children vomit and cry, or both,” (Cizek, 2001) or tests that specifically give out instructions on what to do if one vomits on a test booklet (Ohanian, 2002), the approach that is executed to improve scores in standardized tests is extreme.

Now that both sides of this controversial topic has been covered in great detail, one who is reading this paper must make a decision on what stance he or she will take on this issue. As already demonstrated, there are many arguments in favor of and against administering standardized tests. Many of those arguments, as one may noticed when reading them, are distinct arguments or arguments that can only be made for one side. However, there are also arguments that overlap both sides of the issue in a manner that allows for rebuttals given how an argument made by one side can be countered by a claim on the other. In the case of this controversial issue, many of the pro arguments for standardized testing can be rebutted provided by factual evidence. For example, someone on the pro side of the debate will claim that “20 school systems that have achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains on national and international assessments used frequent, standardized testing to monitor system progress” (Mona, Chinezi and Barber, 2010). A rebuttal from the con side to counter this would describe how the national rank of the U.S. overall has dropped, signifying that although improvement exists in some parts the country, there is struggle felt nationwide or on average.

Analyzing the sides more carefully, one could also probably take note of the tone and language used for when addressing certain arguments, particularly from the affirmative side. Going back to how each side approached the issue of testing students with special needs or disabilities and non-native speakers, there is a noticeable difference in how each argument

was constructed. The pro side argued that there should be even footing amongst everyone, whether or not one was adept at learning at a set pace (strict tone) while the con side pointed out that in doing so, students of the aforementioned group will be already put at a disadvantage (understanding tone). The disadvantage would arise from factors concerning time to complete problems, understanding topics that require comprehension on a level appropriate enough for a typical student without any hindrance of problems, and vice versa. It is true that students with disabilities and non-native speakers must learn the same materials as their classmates but are they taught in the same manner? Of course not; just as how teachers and administrators conduct classes and separate these students according to their needs, standardized tests must reflect the learning style of these students. Having two separate tests that cover the same topics but differ in wording would be a great solution to this problem to ensure that everybody is tested on what they are learning regardless of how one learns.

Conclusively, standardized tests are often in the midst of heavy debate regarding their effectiveness, which are mainly seen as either positive or negative or both. Needless to say, the arguments made on each side of the issue illustrate the reasons for why the tests are needed and how they are useful per situation. But there are also arguments that don't say enough or are overall weak. While the affirmative side of the issue points to how standardized tests are necessary because they determine an individual's mastery of a subject in a holistic (cumulative) manner that can be graded with ease (to analyze a population's skill level and counter cheating), they do not acknowledge the shortcomings and flaws of the tests' structure. These flaws and shortcomings negatively affect a school's curricula to the point of narrowing the prospect of learning about the arts or the world and even take so much away from a student balancing their schoolwork while growing up. At least with the opposition

side, the arguments point to these problems and perhaps one day, there will be a movement to significantly restructure standardized tests. Solutions from timing to including more subjects to even having multiple tests instead of one per year will lessen the stress the tests tend to have on young learners. In all, what standardized tests accomplish isn't incorrect; the manner of which it is made, studied for and even approached is wrong and will inevitably improve given the awareness hopefully that research papers like these raise.

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