The case against
the SAT

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Across the country high school students' alarm clocks ring at 5 a.m., perhaps the earliest ever for a Saturday morning. But then this isn't the usual Saturday morning. This is SAT morning, when hundreds of thousands of high school juniors and seniors will take the Scholastic Aptitude Test, hoping to score high enough to get into the colleges of their choice.

A million and a half students take the test each year, many for the second or third time. Some take the test even more times. A few years ago, 18 percent of the 10,000 applicants to the Naval Academy reported four sets of scores. Two percent reported eight or more. One eager applicant took the test nineteen times.

The SAT is constructed, administered, scored, and explained to the public by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the nation's largest nonprofit educational-research organization, with over 2,400 employees. With headquarters just outside Princeton, New Jersey, ETS maintains field offices in seven other American cities. It boasts that its international activities "extend to every continent, to nations ranging alphabetically from Argentina to Zaire."

Nearly six million people took ETS tests in 1983. Besides the SAT, ETS gives tests that help decide who will enter our nation's
elite secondary schools and its graduate and business schools, and who will receive certification as a teacher or an attorney. For the past six years we've examined the examiners, to determine the validity of ETS's claims on behalf of the SAT. Our research grew out of the controversy sparked by Ralph Nader and Allan Nairn in 1980 with their publication of The Reign of ETS, a report highly critical of the Educational Testing Service. We thought that the report's version of ETS's role in the history and development of admissions testing was oversimplified, and that its conclusions about the usefulness of the SAT suffered from serious technical flaws. Nevertheless, some of the charges leveled by Nader and Nairn, as well as the counterclaims made by ETS on behalf of the SAT, warrant more careful scrutiny than anyone gave them.

Unlike many critics, we do not question ETS's claim that the SAT measures important abilities that are related to educational success. Rather, we argue that despite its ability to predict educational success, the SAT is unnecessary. This apparent paradox disappears when one recognizes that even when a test predicts college success fairly accurately, it may not improve prediction much when used to supplement information available from high schools about students' coursework and grades.

Our study of ETS's promotion of the SAT reveals how ETS has violated the public confidence placed in it. At times, ETS and the College Entrance Examination Board (the nonprofit organization that sponsors the SAT) have behaved more like corporations bent on defending their products at all costs than like nonprofit institutions working for the public good. Rather than openly assessing the effects of their products, or even debating the adequacy of others' assessments, these organizations have failed to gather serious evidence for their claims, and have often ignored or denounced evidence that undermines their positions.

ETS myth #1: The SAT helps colleges

ETS and the College Board assert that SAT scores are intended to supplement the secondary-school record and other relevant information about students to assess their competence for college work. Why use SAT scores to assess competence for college work? Because, ETS says, although "students' previous grades are the most important indicators, . . . the addition of scores on good tests adds significantly to the prediction of success."

How much does the SAT add to the prediction of success? George H. Hanford, past president of the College Board, puts it this way:
"Thousands of validity studies prove that the SAT increases predictive efficiency by 40 to 50 percent when it is used in helping to estimate first-year college grades." Although Hanford exaggerates the predictive efficiency of the SAT, students with the same high school grades but different SAT scores do have varied prospects of college success. More often than not, students with higher SAT scores will have higher freshman grades and a higher probability of graduating from college.

But these studies tell us almost nothing about the usefulness of the test to colleges, because predicting freshman grades is not the ultimate goal of the admissions process. The raison d'etre of a college admissions office is to admit or reject applicants. The SAT can be useful only if it helps colleges admit students they would normally reject on the basis of their high school records, and reject applicants they would normally admit using only high school records. If colleges that used the high school record were to admit and reject the same students whether or not they also used the SAT, the test would add nothing to colleges' actual admissions decisions—though it might still be useful for counselling those admitted.

Our analysis, based on data from hundreds of American colleges, indicates that an admissions policy based on the high school record alone will classify at least 84 percent of the applicants identically with one based on the high school record and SAT. Of the remaining 16 percent whose admissions results change by including SAT scores, only a few will clearly be categorized more accurately. In other words, most students whose SAT scores have kept them out of a particular college would have done as well there as the average student whom the SAT admits. Using average freshman grades as a measure of how well the admissions process has selected a class, our research shows that American colleges make only one to three additional clearly correct admissions forecasts—admitting students who will have successful freshman years and rejecting ones who will not—out of each hundred as a result of using the SAT.

The benefits of the SAT are not impressive when we look at how little the test helps colleges improve the average grades of the students they admit. The typical gain to colleges from adding the SAT to the high-school record is only an increase in average freshman grades of 0.02 on the usual four-point scale. The SAT is even less useful in predicting which students will graduate from college. On average, only one to three correct forecasts per thousand are added by using the SAT.
From a practical viewpoint, then, colleges could ignore SAT scores when they make selection decisions without appreciably altering the academic performance and graduation rates of the students they admit. We doubt that any college would notice the small loss in predictive efficiency brought about by abandoning the SAT.

**ETS myth #2: The SAT helps applicants**

ETS encourages applicants to use their SAT scores to select colleges whose academic standards are not too rigorous for them. Our evidence suggests, however, that applicants cannot effectively use their SAT scores this way. Nor, as far as we can tell, has ETS tried to verify the claim that they can.

Many American colleges are relatively unselective. The 1985 American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers' study of admissions policies showed that 90 percent of the two-year public colleges and 15 percent of the four-year public colleges surveyed either did not review applicants' academic qualifications or admitted any high school graduate.

Most four-year colleges are somewhat more selective, however. Sometimes selective colleges use their catalogs and other publications to tell the public quite explicitly what kind of students they want. But anyone who has browsed through many college catalogs or commercial guides to colleges knows that explicit descriptions of admissions requirements are the exception, not the rule.

Prospective applicants know very little about a college's admissions standards. Many colleges judge how well a prospective student will perform academically on the basis of considered but informal observations of how well past applicants from known high schools have done. In general, prospective applicants know neither what exceptions a college might make to its own requirements nor how colleges may weigh other factors like extracurricular activities, ability to pay, or being a child of an alumnus.

Since completing college applications takes time and effort, and submitting them costs money, most high school students try to apply to colleges to which they have a reasonable chance of being admitted. Leonard Baird, a former researcher at ETS, found that students who took the SAT applied to an average of 2.4 colleges and were accepted at 1.9 of them. Only 5 percent were not accepted by any college; this figure typically varied by only one to three percentage points, depending upon the applicant's family income and SAT score.

The self-selection to which these figures point is useful because it screens in prospective applicants who are likely to be successful, and
screens out prospective applicants who are likely to do poorly. For example, if a highly selective college whose freshmen average 1200 on the SAT accepted all the students who applied to similarly selective colleges, it would have a freshman class whose grades averaged 2.89 on a four-point scale. The failure rate would be 9 percent. If it accepted the applicants to any college, the freshman grade-point average would fall to 2.61, and the failure rate would increase to 18.9 percent. In this case, self-selection raises freshman grades from an average of 2.61 to 2.89 and lowers the failure rate from 18.9 to 9 percent.

These results illustrate how applicants' self-selection can help selective colleges by improving the quality of their entering classes. The results do not, however, show that students need to make use of their SAT scores to achieve these benefits.

Information that applicants receive from colleges, prospective applicants' own academic records, test scores, family influences, and a variety of other factors all contribute to a student's decision about where to apply. More often than not, these various sources tend to agree about where the student should apply. The result is that the judgments applicants could make about their academic performance in college by using their SAT scores are essentially identical to the judgments they could make without using them.

Suppose that applicants did not use their SAT scores to help them decide where to apply. The most obvious information they could use to estimate their academic success at any college would be their knowledge about the competitiveness of that college, along with their self-understanding (based upon their high school performance and other sources). Now suppose each applicant made a second prediction of how well he would do, using all the other information and his SAT scores. The important question is whether the additional information derived from the SAT would change the applicant's estimate of success enough to alter his decision about whether to apply to the college.

Using freshman grades as a measure of success, our analysis shows that if applicants were able to predict as well as we can statistically, the two predictions for any applicant would differ by only 0.09 of a grade on average; they would seldom differ by more than 0.3 of a grade. Furthermore, there would be almost as much variation in actual freshman grade averages for applicants who predicted the same grades for themselves as there would be for the entire group. This low accuracy of predicted grades makes it unlikely that
applicants would notice or pay attention to the small difference in predictions brought about by knowing the SAT scores.

Of course, applicants may not be able to predict their academic performance as accurately as we can statistically. They may therefore make incorrect predictions about their likely freshman grades. This will happen any time an applicant’s SAT scores make him reach a conclusion about his likely freshman success that differs very much from the one reached on the basis of his high school record and the character of the college being considered.

ETS often praises the SAT for the help it provides students in self-selection. But it has never investigated how many students apply to colleges for which they are certainly not qualified solely because they did well on the test. Nor has it tried to determine the number of students who fail to apply to schools where they might be admitted, simply because their scores seemed too low. In matters of self-selection, it is unclear whether the SAT does more harm than good.

ETS myth #3: The SAT promotes equal opportunity

For a long time it has been known that one can accurately predict the future success or failure of prospective college applicants, simply by knowing their race, the quality of their schooling, and their family background. In the past ETS denied that the competition among students with widely varying backgrounds was unfair. In 1960 it took the view that “justice should be done each individual according to his merit.” The objective test “is a common touchstone. . . . It gives all students who take it the same chance, asks them to run the same race—even though they have had different economic backgrounds, different educational, cultural, and social opportunities.”

Twenty years later, after overwhelming evidence had shown that student scores on ETS’s “common touchstone” correlated closely with students’ race, family income, and parental education, ETS guardedly admitted that the competition might be unfair:

While there is a correlation between family income and test scores, other indicators of educational achievement, including school grades, have similar relationships to students’ economic backgrounds. These are reflections of a [sic] fact that, in our society, students from higher income families enjoy educational advantages that many lower income students do not.

By 1984 ETS acknowledged that the competition for college admission was unequal, but claimed that standardized tests could help rectify matters:

To attack testing because of unfavorable results is to attack a potential force for improving those results. Throwing away the thermometer does
not cure a virus. So it is with the problem of unequal educational opportunities. . . . Such information [test results] helps to focus public attention on unequal opportunities and to keep public pressure on these inequities until they are corrected.

Not surprisingly, those who wish to enlarge educational opportunities for minorities and low-income students feel little gratitude toward ETS. The "public attention on unequal opportunities" that ETS claims to focus seems to wax and wane. But steadily and certainly, ETS's standardized tests have helped to lessen the chances that the average economically disadvantaged student will be admitted to a good college. The SAT appears to have an even harsher effect on black admissions.

What are the effects on black applicants of colleges using the SAT? Our research indicates that when admissions decisions are made without regard to applicants' color—so that the same standards are used for whites and blacks—adding the SAT to the high school record reduces the number of blacks admitted to colleges, sometimes by more than half, but does not reduce the number of whites admitted.

Some colleges might justify lowering the number of admitted blacks if use of the test yielded better performance on the part of those black students who were admitted. We could find no evidence that it does, however. Adding the SAT leads to the indiscriminate rejection of both potentially unsuccessful and successful blacks. We found that randomly rejecting the same additional percentage of blacks that the SAT helps to reject leads to admissions outcomes, measured in terms of freshman grades or graduation rates, that are almost identical to those reached with the aid of the SAT.

Consequently, a color-blind admissions process using the SAT in effect adds a supplement to the high school record that fails to distinguish good students from bad, but rejects blacks. We found this to be as true when the test is used to predict the likelihood of college graduation as when it is used to predict freshman grades. We also found that the test has a similar impact on low-income applicants.

However, because many college admissions officers worry that their admissions procedures harm the prospects of black applicants, few make color-blind decisions. Instead, officers often use quotas of some sort and lower their admissions standards in order to enroll these students.

To the extent that they do so, using the SAT does not reduce the number of blacks admitted, because colleges decide to admit a cer-
tain number of blacks regardless of SAT results. But the SAT could still influence which blacks are admitted. For this reason we can wonder whether a college that uses the SAT to help it decide which blacks to admit will make better admissions decisions than one that uses only the high school record. We find that it will not.

Colleges that use the SAT to evaluate black students will make the same admissions decisions—to admit or reject—for almost every black applicant that they would make without the SAT. Admissions outcomes for blacks are virtually identical under the two admissions policies. This is as true when the admissions standard is set to admit a large percentage of the blacks who apply as when it is set to admit a small percentage of them. Colleges could therefore drop the SAT with no loss in their ability to choose successful black applicants.

Overselling the SAT

Over the years ETS and the College Board have done a masterful job of promoting the SAT. One of the cornerstones of their testing logic has always been "to each according to his or her predicted success." Admission to college based on predicted success is currently justified by the two concepts of fairness and efficiency. The test is fair, ETS claims, because it measures aptitude rather than textbook knowledge; therefore the scores do not reflect the quality of the applicants' schooling. It is also efficient, in ETS's view, because it can predict how well students will perform in college, and therefore which colleges they should attend.

But before fairness and efficiency became the pitch, ETS had used several others. Since its inception in 1947, ETS has carefully marketed the SAT to each succeeding generation. After World War II, for instance, ETS advanced the SAT as a means of discovering the appropriate manpower required for an increasingly technological society. During the Cold War, ETS advocated the SAT as a "secret weapon" to combat the Soviet educational system. In the 1960s it encouraged colleges to think of the SAT as an aptitude test that predicted success in college by being able to control for poor preparation and adverse social and economic circumstances.

Few people ever took the trouble to examine the validity of these various claims because they reinforced widely held beliefs. The current themes of fairness and efficiency are warmly received and rarely questioned by colleges today. But if ETS succeeds at public relations, it still fails to provide a useful service. ETS has too much influence over what the public learns about its tests; in the absence
of competition, it has not been forced to supply the information needed by colleges and consumers.

Eliminating the SAT

Many college admissions officers become distinctly nervous at the suggestion of dropping the SAT. This would require them to rate applicants solely on the basis of their high school grades and class ranks, the quality of their high schools, and the difficulty of their courses. As we have seen, such information should be adequate to determine the eligibility of applicants. Nevertheless, if admissions offices did decide to drop the SAT, it is likely they would also have to drop the eligibility formulas so many of them use to lighten their work loads. Admissions officers would then have to study each application more carefully; they might worry that more mistakes would be made.

But this fear is largely groundless. Many selective colleges in our country are very small, with undergraduate enrollments of less than 2,000. They may receive 1,500 or fewer freshman applications every year. Even small admissions staffs at these colleges could easily read every application and make admissions decisions without the SAT. The important question is how well they could evaluate a candidate's credentials without the SAT.

We think they could evaluate them quite well. Admissions professionals have, in the vast majority of cases, detailed knowledge of applicants' high schools and the success or failure of other students from those schools; in some cases they may even be personally acquainted with the guidance counselor, principal, or headmaster. When applicants are from a completely unknown high school, the admissions officer can telephone to request information such as the applicants' rank in class, syllabi of courses they have taken, or college-attendance rates for earlier graduating classes. Alternatively, the admissions officer can contact a colleague whose college has experience with the school in question.

During the fall of 1986, SAT scores were delayed at Amherst College for about 10 percent of their early-decision candidates. Henry Bedford, dean of admissions, read the applications without ETS reports. After the scores arrived, other members of Bedford's staff evaluated the candidates. Bedford wrote us: "In no case did the academic rating vary from mine; the only serious difference was a question of the magnitude by which one candidate was not qualified for admission." Although this information is clearly unsys-
tematic and anecdotal—it is based on only about forty cases—it certainly does not portend disaster if Amherst were to drop the SAT.

A little more problematic, in our opinion, is the case of the larger colleges and universities that receive thousands of applications annually. Of course, the number of applications that must be studied carefully at these colleges may be much smaller than the thousands received, since many decisions to admit or reject are clear at the outset. Moreover, the highly selective colleges that receive large numbers of applications from well-qualified students have admissions staffs large enough to make admissions decisions as carefully as small selective colleges. Still, in many larger but relatively unselective colleges and universities, it is impractical for admissions officers to give every applicant’s folder the same careful study that small selective colleges can.

These are the colleges that necessarily rely on selection formulas to aid in their decision-making. The best of these formulas use information about applicants’ high school work and test scores to forecast their academic success. Our findings show, however, that adding applicants’ SAT scores to formulas based on their high school records changes very few admissions decisions, and improves colleges’ admissions outcomes very little.

Consequently, both small and large selective colleges and universities that now use the SAT could drop the test with no serious negative consequences; their acceptance rates for blacks and lower-income applicants would probably increase if they do not now use a quota. In general, we are inclined to side with David Owen’s conclusion: “If the SAT simply disappeared tomorrow, admissions officers would squawk for a year or so, the foundations of the Henry Chauncey Center [at ETS] would tremble, and life would go on as before. The SAT plays virtually no useful role in college admissions right now. Getting rid of it would not, by itself, make admissions very different.”

Some undergraduate colleges have already made the SAT optional recently, most notably Bowdoin and Bates. The experience at both colleges has proved positive. Reports also surface periodically that Harvard and other major universities are considering the same step.

But suppose that American colleges that now use the SAT were to begin dropping the test over the next few years, and suppose further that no harm was done as a result. It would follow then that colleges could drop the SAT and make their admissions decisions based solely on applicants’ high school records. But it would not fol-
low that colleges *ought* to drop the SAT and rely only on high-school records. One reason not to drop all admissions tests is that other kinds of admissions tests may have virtues the SAT lacks. (See Christopher Jencks and James Crouse, "Aptitude vs. Achievement: Should We Replace the SAT?" in *The Public Interest*, No. 67, Spring 1982.)

**The case for achievement tests**

From the founding of the College Board in 1900 until the 1940s, the most common standardized tests were achievement tests, which were offered in subjects like history, chemistry, mathematics, physics, and English. Aptitude tests like the SAT did not exist until the 1920s, and did not become popular until two decades later. Both the flaws in the SAT and the merits of achievement tests lead us to advocate replacing the SAT with achievement tests.

One of the things a test does is certify competence. What kind of competence does the SAT certify? Is it what colleges want? Samuel Messick, an ETS vice president for research, is the company's leading spokesman on the skills measured by the SAT. He says the SAT "measures developed abilities of verbal and mathematical reasoning and comprehension." But even if the SAT measures these things, we doubt that colleges are interested in having only these abilities certified. If that were so, colleges would have stopped looking at high school grades in academic courses long ago.

Achievement tests attempt to measure knowledge of particular high school subjects rather than general ability, and therein lies their advantage. Both college teachers and the general public have become increasingly concerned in recent years that college freshmen know less than they used to. Most observers agree that American high school students do less academic work than their counterparts in Europe and Japan. They also agree that one reason European and Japanese teenagers work hard is that they must take achievement tests at the end of secondary school; these tests largely determine whether and where they will be allowed to obtain higher education. If American colleges were to base admissions on high school grades and tests that certify mastery of the secondary-school curriculum, instead of basing it on grades and tests that measure vocabulary, reading comprehension, and general mathematics, high school students eager to attend college might be encouraged to take their academic work more seriously.

A college-admissions testing program that emphasized achievement tests would also create incentives for high schools to offer
more demanding academic courses, and for college-bound students to take them. A high school senior trying to decide between a European history course and a nonacademic elective, for example, is more likely to choose the history course if he knows he must compete favorably against others on a history achievement test to get into a selective college.

Emphasizing tests that measure mastery of the secondary-school academic curriculum would encourage high school students to take more difficult courses. It is true that college-bound students are somewhat encouraged to take advanced courses, because college admissions offices take note of what courses they have taken and what grades they have received. But the additional incentive of achievement tests can only encourage them more.

Achievement tests and curricular diversity

The effect of replacing the SAT with conventional achievement tests would depend, of course, on how the system worked. If too few colleges required applicants to submit achievement-test scores, students would not take them seriously, or might not take them at all. But if colleges in large or even moderate numbers were to require conventional achievement tests, and to convince students that their scores were important, secondary schools might offer courses that would supply students with the general educational background that many find lacking in today's college freshmen.

Some who oppose the use of conventional achievement tests for college admissions argue that preoccupation with tests would drive teachers to teach only information relevant to the tests; they also fear that the tests would encourage cramming, discourage creative thinking, and concentrate attention on skills amenable to measurement by the multiple-choice format. We too would oppose the exclusive preoccupation of teachers with preparing for the tests, but we do not think this will happen if the tests cover sufficiently broad areas, if test questions are kept secure prior to their use, and if essay questions are asked, as they are now.

The College Board currently offers achievement tests in fourteen subjects. If more colleges were concerned with measuring achievement, ETS could easily double this number; it could even give several types of exams in the more popular subjects. If colleges allowed students to take as many exams as they wanted, while only reporting their highest scores, students could take a lot of unorthodox courses without jeopardizing their admissions prospects. Many col-
leges would embrace a system that encouraged diversity in academic interests. Such a system would still reward verbal and mathematical reasoning and comprehension, as the SAT now does, but it would also require and reward sustained study in at least a few additional areas, which the present admissions testing system does not.

New kinds of achievement tests

ETS's achievement tests have rightly been criticized for their superficiality and for the ease with which they can be coached, however. For this reason a better model for achievement testing, one that tries to ensure a match between what is tested and what is taught, is the College Board's Advanced Placement Program (AP). High schools that participate in the Advanced Placement Program offer courses based on course descriptions and detailed specifications worked out by representatives of both colleges and high schools. The program's major components are curriculum materials for twenty-four college-level courses in thirteen subjects, AP workshops and institutes for teachers, and annual college-level examinations for students. A recent survey for the College Board by Research and Forecasts, Inc., strongly supported the program as "a model for improving educational quality."

Why not extend the idea of Advanced Placement courses to college-preparatory courses generally? A new admissions achievement-testing program covering specified curricula in a large number of areas could encourage students to take a variety of serious academic courses in high school, while giving admissions officers as much common ground as the SAT currently provides.

The College Board has recently been reconsidering the relative merits of uniform achievement testing. Its Project Equality program, which was begun in 1980, has brought together hundreds of school and college educators, laypeople concerned with education, and subject-matter specialists to draft and build a consensus for a new statement of "Preferred Patterns of Preparation" for college in the 1980s and beyond. Project Equality has already identified areas in the secondary-school curriculum that "can be defined in measurable terms."

Were the College Board to expand Project Equality to include the development of achievement tests and curricula along the lines of the Advanced Placement Program, it would encourage changes in our admissions-testing system that reward those who learn the most in secondary school. As long as the tests are given and graded nationwide, the system would still provide admissions officers with
a common yardstick, but it would also provide the other advantages we have presented: the tests would certify competence, encourage educational improvement, promote curricular diversity, and emphasize academic content. Given the failure of the SAT to do these things, and to do what ETS says it does, such a system would represent a vast improvement over the present one.