

Cooking the Books: Racial and Sexual Politics in the SAT? (IP-12-1994)

October 1, 1994

Issue Paper

By [David Murray](#)

America's academic accountant has developed sticky fingers. By distorted entries in two separate accounts, grading and the SAT, the country is being scammed. We are robbed of valid measure of school results, and student achievers are deprived of just rewards for real ability.

When 90% of Stanford students receive grades of A or B, the standard curve is destroyed. When over 40% of Harvard students make the honor role every term, flunking out necessitates a deliberate act of self-immolation.

Former Stanford president Donald Kennedy defended this inflation; students today are just so much better that they don't do C work, the same way that some maids don't do windows.

The point of a grade curve was to judge students against each other. Even an Olympic race with the best sprinters in the world produces some winners and some losers. If, on the other hand, grading is absolute, as in many sciences, then it is possible for the cross-bar of effort to be cleared by all, and all may receive A's.

But why has the number of great leapers ostensibly been increasing when scores on the few objective measures left, like the SAT Math test, plummet year after year?

Professor Jacob Neusner broke the silence about grade inflation a few years ago at a Brown University commencement. The reason you all get good grades is it's the path of least resistance. The faculty do it to avoid the effort of real grading, the students accept it and call off their parents' lawyer guarding against the vicious C.

It is a great compromise, just like in the Soviet economy; you pretend to study, and we pretend to grade you. No one will be the wiser, except for maybe the Japanese and Koreans who will whoosh past American students on the research and productivity road. Professor Neusner, by the way, no longer teaches at Brown.

Critics of the SAT have now produced a self-fulfilling prophecy. They charged, against the evidence, that there was no correlation between test scores and subsequent grades in college. Now the charge has been made true; whether one scores 1300 or 1050 *is* irrelevant--both students are on the honor roll.

Grade inflation is serious, but devaluing the SAT is more so. The charges of bias against the test are overwhelmingly bunk. The Educational Testing Service maintains extraordinary efforts to eliminate advantage not directly tied to academic preparation. Yet still, groups score differentially.

This fact of differential performance leads critics to call for more than reform of the SAT; they want it dropped. Some admission offices have complied. As a response to the charge of bias, however, this deletion is counterproductive.

The SAT is used to calibrate high-school grades from many different kinds of schools with different standards of grading. Its presence serves the interests of better students, by revealing that a grade of B from a first-rank program may represent superior preparation over an A from a weak program, once the two students are put on the same testing "track."

Without the SAT, incomparable grades gain greater determinative power. Critics propose to supplant the SAT with essays or portfolios of high-school work. These may be valuable, but they are hardly less susceptible to bias and subjectivity than the objective instrument they replace.

Why, then, do critics encourage admissions to adopt these alternative standards? The most common response is that the college gains, thereby, "flexibility." This is a misleading term, as I shall discuss

below.

Critics do not have a good track record. A focus of recent attacks was the National Merit Scholar awards, based on the Preliminary SAT. Males receive more awards than females, based on their testing performance during high school. Enter the educational engineer, eager to "correct" the situation.

To gain the social goal of more female winners, a formula was introduced into the scoring. The Merit Scholars would be selected not by the scores on PSAT Verbal and Math components, but rather on a new measure, the Index score. The Index score results from doubling the Verbal raw score and adding to it the Math score.

The reasoning was as follows. Males, in general, outscore females on the Math portion, and hence do better overall. Males do not substantially outscore females, however, on the Verbal portion of the test, and in some subdivisions, females do somewhat better. Therefore, by doubling the portion on which females do proportionally better, one could shift the overall balance of awards in their favor. All in the name of social justice, of course.

Here is a concrete example. Student Y scores 1100 on the PSAT, with the breakdown being Verbal 500, Math 600. Student X also scores 1100 on the PSAT, but in reverse order: Verbal 600, Math 500. There is no overall difference, and the awarding of recognition treats them both the same. But because the profile of student Y is likely to fit that of a male, and the profile of student X is more commonly female, the engineer gets to work.

After the application of the Index, what was before the same overall performance, 1100 on the PSAT, now becomes "different," and in the very direction that social justice foreordains. Student Y's $V\ 500$ times two plus his $M\ 600$ equals a total Index score of 1600. Sorry, no award. But student X's $V\ 600$ times two plus $M\ 500$ equals a total Index of 1700. Congratulations.

Now comes the most inexorable of liberal engineering stinkers, the law of unintended consequences. It turns out that in order to rectify one "injustice," that between males and females, the new SAT Index score introduces, without meaning to, another disparity--that between races.

The problem is that the relational profile of males to females on PSAT performance mirrors that of Asian to non-Asian test-takers. That is, Asian PSAT test-takers score considerably better on the Math portion of the test than they do on the Verbal. Hence, return to the concrete example above, and see that student Y and student X are just as likely to be Asian and white, respectively, as they are to be male and female.

The overall movement has again become self-fulfilling prophecy. The assumption was that an initial system, which was a fair measure of actual performance, was in reality discriminatory.

Measures were introduced based on that assumption, the result being that now the Merit Scholar awards are, in fact, not only unjustly discriminatory, but discriminatory in a systematic manner. That is, a fair instrument essential to a meritocracy has been remade into an active agent of unjust exclusion.

There is more to come. Recently, the Educational Testing Service determined to "re-center" the SAT scores, henceforth adding points to the average performance until it sticks at 500. Average performance scores have fallen persistently since 1963, their peak, to a current Verbal low of 424. The Math average, however, has regained a fairly respectable 478, nearly the standard of old. Since the test has a range from 200 to 800, the theoretical middle is 500. Thus, by adding points to the current depressed average, the theory and the practice can be brought into coincidence. Should that worry us?

Former Bush administration education official Dianne Ravitch has compared the process to baseball. If one move the fences in 76 feet, there will be substantially more home-runs hit. What is the effect on the game? For weak hitters, a false sense of improved standing in history, and for genuine home-run hitters, a more crowded and compressed field of those getting it over the fence. They lose value, in a sense, because after the ball crosses the fence, it really doesn't matter in the statistics how much

farther it went. In a sense, baseball loses value.

In the case of the SAT, the value is drawn down from our ability to make accurate historical comparisons of academic performance, wiping out in one stroke a nearly thirty-year deficit by resetting the "currency" of the test scores. But under this scenario, does anybody really lose? Just as with baseball, there is no "higher" score to hit past 800, while those hitting 424 feet, as it were, suddenly find that they, too, are hitting homers.

So those above 500 not only have their performance devalued, they find that their population has compressed. One cannot add points to the top of the scale, since there is a ceiling of 800. The effect is to crowd every body against the top, with below-average performers going into the upper ranges, traditionally the rarified air of a small elite.

Why would our educational engineer want to do this? No doubt there is more than one reason, and Lake Wobegonism ("Where every child is above average") is involved. New educational reforms can be pronounced a success, backed by "objective" measures of performance on "standardized" tests. But there is also something else going on. Remember "flexibility?"

University admissions today often resembles social work engaged in reparations for perceived social ills. When SAT scores of targeted beneficiary groups, being low, did not enable admission to elite schools, the maneuver was to adopt "race-norming," the dubious practice of clustering candidates into racial groups. One takes the lead members of each group for admission, regardless that a candidate's ordinal standing may be below that of denied members of non-protected groups.

Race-norming has now become subject of public discussion, however, and is increasingly leading to lawsuits.

Thus, the re-centering of the SAT. The effect is to cluster into compressed categories those whose scores would have been marginal under the old scale, but who now are declared "over the bar." At the same time, the truly capable may not pull farther away because they hit the "ceiling."

Now that the pool of sufficient scorers will contain more of the targeted beneficiary groups, admissions has the license, since the pool is "fully qualified" by SAT scores, to admit selectively those they desire without confronting the legal challenge of race-norming. That is what they mean by "flexibility," and that is what has been achieved by SAT inflation.

Racial politics enter the picture as well. Notice that the "re-centering" has disproportionate effect on the Math and Verbal portions.

The Math average, at 478, needs only 22 points to become "centered" on 500. But the Verbal requires the remarkable addition of 76 points. Not only does the disparity of Math and Verbal suggest that we have a serious national problem with language skills, which fact the "re-centering" will obscure, we have also done something else the engineer desires. We have "rectified" a racial imbalance of total scores, by providing a "subsidy" for Verbal scores that is three times that of the Math score.

Again, an example. Student Y, let us say, scores the same, on Math and Verbal, 478. The total SAT reported is 956. Add in the effect of re-centering, 44 points, and the result is 1000. But let us say student X scores the current averages on both test components. So that would be M 478, and V 424. The initial total is 902. But after re-centering is completed, 22 plus 76, this student, too, has 1000 points. Welcome to college. The effect is that an initial advantage of 54 points on the SAT, a crucial gap often the determiner of admission or rejection, is canceled for student Y and all like him.

Now let us see who is likely to be student Y and student X, in terms of SAT profiles. It is racial engineering that appears to be at the bottom of the maneuver, for Caucasian profiles are similar to that of student Y, and minority student profiles are more similar to student X.

Contemporary admission procedures, for expensive elite colleges in particular, are putting a certain group of students into a vise. White students of privilege, with money, family connections, "legacy" claims, or the advantages of tutoring and social power, will still get admitted to slots "reserved" for their group.

Targeted minority students, on the other side, will enjoy the reparations set-asides, and benefit from

admission's "flexibility" to admit a diverse student body, whether they descend from families of privilege or not.

The groups being squeezed out are the minorities who are not targeted for special standing, especially Asian students who excel not by claiming victim status but by straightforward achievement, and the white lower middle-class, those without the social clout on the one side and without the political muscle on the other.

These Americans, historically second and third generation immigrant kids whose parents and grandparents have stood patiently in line, moving up one step at a time, do not have access to the best educational opportunities or the "toniest" schools.

Instead, they relied upon a great democratizing instrument, one that gave the smartest amongst them a level playing field to show their stuff. That instrument of fairness and mobility, not perfect but the best chance they were going to get, has been the Scholastic Aptitude Test, their shot at knocking politely at the door of America's best schools.

We should ask ourselves whether they will not soon tire of having that door shut on their patient fingers by current educational elites, with their poorly-thought-out efforts to gerrymander academic justice.

Colleges already validate the adage that the chief cause of problems is solutions. Watching the education professionals at work on America's schools is like watching Bart Simpson sewing someone up after heart surgery. "Hey, what's *this* squiggly little thing?" he wonders, tossing it over his shoulder, "Oh well, he probably didn't need an SAT anyway."

David Murray is a Bradley Scholar in Residence with the Heritage Foundation. He wrote this essay for the Independence Institute, a think-tank in Golden, Colorado.

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