

Let's step back from the SAT I

By Richard C. Atkinson
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For most high school students, the three scariest letters in the alphabet are S-A-T. Not only are more students worrying about and preparing for the SAT test required for college admission, they are doing so at younger ages. Last year I observed a class studying verbal analogies that the SAT uses. The students were all of 12 years old.

For students, teachers and college admissions offices, standardized tests can be valuable tools to gauge academic progress and school accountability. But we should not fall into the trap of inflating their importance beyond their utility. I have come to believe that America's overemphasis on standardized tests in general, and the SAT I in particular, is compromising our educational system.

Therefore, [I am recommending to the faculty that the SAT I no longer be required for admission](#) to the University of California.

With nine -- soon to be 10 -- campuses scattered across California, the university I head is one of the largest users of SAT tests in the nation. But our schools, our universities and our children need an alternative to the SAT I, which is distorting education.

No longer requiring the SAT I and adopting a more well-rounded approach to admissions decisions that uses a more relevant standardized test will help strengthen our high schools, focus students' attention on mastering subject matter, and create a stronger connection between our children's accomplishments in school and their likelihood of succeeding in college.

Many students who have excelled in high school often doubt their abilities simply because they did not score well or as well as expected on the SAT I. And because the SAT I can be improperly used as a measurement of high school achievement, it can have a distorting and unfair effect on our children's chances of admission.

In addition, our children more than ever are spending time developing test-taking tricks. The SAT was originally developed 100 years ago as an "achievement" test to give universities a common exam that would provide feedback to secondary schools about their curriculum and open the doors of higher education to more students.

In the 1930s, however, the SAT was adjusted to provide a better test of "basic aptitude," to reduce the advantage enjoyed by students who attended schools with a rich curriculum and excellent teachers. But this change created the impression that the SAT was an IQ test, a measure of "innate intelligence."

This kind of test and the uses to which it has been put are very different from what those original educators had in mind. All too often, universities use SAT scores to rank applicants. This use of the SAT I does not sit well with our distinctly American notion that opportunity should be fair, open and earned on merit. As an academic whose research specialty is memory and cognition, I think we can, and must, do better with a more holistic approach to admissions, an approach that emphatically does not lower the bar for academic excellence, but does do a better job of evaluating applicants.

That's why I am recommending a three-pronged approach:

- No longer require the SAT I for admission;
- Develop standardized tests directly tied to the college preparatory courses required of applicants;
- Continue to require the SAT II, until new tests are available. The SAT II, which focuses on knowledge of specific subject matter such as mathematics, measures student accomplishment and begins to approximate an appropriate test for universities.

These proposed changes will come at some cost. But we must make this investment in the fairness, integrity and quality of American higher education.

The strength of American education rests on the bedrock that actual achievement is what matters most. Whatever our background, wherever we live everyone agrees that students should be judged by what they have actually made of the opportunities available to them.

That is why I believe replacing the SAT I as an admissions requirement with standardized tests that assess student accomplishment is a solution that works for everyone.

There are many things we can do as a nation to improve schools. Fixing the way we measure student achievement, and how we use those yardsticks, is an important step in that shared effort.

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