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Managing the Elite

By John V. Lombardi May 27, 2008
4:29 pm

A recent *Inside HigherEd* (May 27, 2008), and elsewhere in the media, reflects much excitement about the decision by various highly selective institutions to stop requiring the SAT or

ACT for admission to their colleges or universities. This is surely an interesting phenomenon, but whether it is good news or not depends on your perspective.

For those who dislike standardized tests because they measure a specific set of skills that correlate highly with income and the better schooling that income provides, the egalitarian presumption prevails and they celebrate the elimination of the test requirement. Eliminating standardized tests is a good thing in this view because it allows elite colleges to admit student who score badly on these tests either because they take tests poorly or because they have suffered various levels of disadvantage in their K-12 schooling that leave them less prepared for such tests.

For those who like standardized tests because they set a national norm for some forms of academic achievement, the decline of standards presumption prevails and they decry the elimination of the test requirement. Eliminating standardized tests is a bad thing in this view because it allows poor secondary schools to produce badly prepared students who cannot score well on these tests without those students necessarily suffering a penalty when they seek collegiate acceptance. They also believe the absence of standardized tests of this kind eliminates one of the few national norms for academic performance that can compensate for the presumed rampant grade inflation of secondary schools.

All of this is good for the ideological debate about elitism in American higher education and the drive to admit more, poor test-taking students to elite institutions. Somehow, we believe, that opening up a few places for those who score badly on such tests will improve equality in America. Probably not. The elimination of these tests from the college admission process may help those less privileged, but it is also a good thing for privileged, low scoring students. Absent such tests, selective institutions have much more freedom to manage admissions to their institutions. They can follow the needs of the institution, whether it is for a higher proportion of minority or first generation or men or women or international students without regard to the relative abilities of the various applicants. If an applicant comes from a very wealthy family but has a poor SAT score and we admit that applicant, we no longer need to explain this deficit to the parents of students from less wealthy circumstances with very good SAT scores. Instead, we say, "Well, our whole file review demonstrated a profile of engagement and involvement that clearly indicates this is a promising student, and in any case we don't require the SAT." Similarly, if we want to exclude candidates for admission because we have too many of one kind or another of some defined group, it is much easier to do so when we no longer need reference a

national standard for academic aptitude, accomplishment, or performance.

The argument that the test is not a reliable academic indicator is of course a good one, except that elsewhere in the current media we read enthusiastic discussions of national entrance and exit testing to determine whether the students we admit into colleges and universities are learning anything. On one side, we think this sort of standardized testing may be a bad thing for evaluating students for admission but on the other side, we think this sort of standardized testing may be a good thing for evaluating students to know whether they learned anything in college. Furthermore, our colleagues in legislatures and public schools find themselves fully engaged in standardized testing to determine whether the students who graduate from high school know what they are supposed to know. Clearly, we are ambivalent about the purpose and value of testing.

To some extent, the problem also reflects our ambivalence about the notion of elitism. We do not like it in principle (although much of our effort in higher education seeks to increase the number of people who can participate in elite lifestyles). We try to create educational systems that can bypass the normally successful self-perpetuation of elites. In this, we have failed. By definition, education is about creating elites; the only question is how big that elite will be and who has a chance to participate in it. When we believed that the method for achieving the most egalitarian outcome involved a focus on merit, which is a level of performance measured without regard for the economic circumstances of the individual, we rushed to create merit-based selection systems for our elite colleges and universities, and the SAT/ACT gold standard emerged.

Although we should have known better, we soon discovered that while the SAT/ACT did indeed set a standard and did indeed provide a reference point for determining whether we were discriminating based on family heritage and income rather than on a national standard of objective merit, it also provided us with objective evidence that the students who acquired the skills to succeed on the SAT/ACT standard attended high schools and prep-schools mostly located in upper income areas or received support available only to wealthy families. It turned out that merit of the kind objectively measured by the SAT/ACT actually served as a proxy for the merit purchased by the already elite. Some smart non-elite students demonstrated an aptitude for these tests and gained access to the elite colleges, but the correlation between high performance on the SAT/ACT and reasonably prosperous economic circumstances is undeniable.

Our objective measure turned out to help perpetuate the preferential access of reasonably well off people to elite higher education. That did not seem to be an egalitarian result, especially when the distribution of wealth in America often reflected other divisions in society related to ethnicity.

Struggling with this, we turned first to quota-based systems to guarantee a proportion of our stock of elite admissions to groups deemed to be disadvantaged under the merit system driven by the SAT/ACT. If specific ethnic, gender, or economic groups appeared underrepresented for whatever reason, we discounted the SAT/ACT standard for members of these groups to guarantee a particular proportion of spaces that would provide a more egalitarian profile in our elite institutions. This straightforward approach, however, failed legal review, which usually determined that such quotas, when based on race or gender, were not constitutional, or political review in various referenda and legislative actions.

In pursuit of acceptable methods of achieving this desired proportionality, we sought out other techniques. Some states enacted plans that guaranteed, for public universities, admission into the elite public institutions to the top 10% of the graduates of each high school, a device that leveraged the de facto ethnic or income segregation of many American public high schools to achieve an egalitarian objective without specifying ethnicity. We also invented the notion of first-generation admissions, defining a child of parents who had never attended college as more meritorious than a child of parents who had attended. This first-generation notion again offered an opportunity to leverage the economic disadvantage of specific groups to create a preference that, while not defined in terms of ethnicity, permits an improvement in the proportion of desired groups within the admitted student population.

Finally, we have come to the realization that equality of opportunity to attend a prestigious elite college or university requires us to eliminate any specific standards of admission in favor of simply looking at all the applicants as individuals and admitting those we think will create the right profile of undergraduates for our institution. This, in the end of course, is what we used to do before we worried about equality of opportunity. In those days, elite colleges had no nationally referenced standards and admitted or excluded students to create the "right" profile to match the ideal expectations of

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those colleges' elite constituencies. While we imagine that the flexibility of admissions will produce a readjustment in favor of disadvantaged groups, it is entirely possible that it will also facilitate readjustment in favor of low achieving but highly advantaged groups.

What does this all mean? It means that universities and colleges respond to the pressures of their time, as do all major social and cultural institutions. It means that if academic practices, such as tests in this case, interfere with the need to meet important social and cultural expectations of our society, we will eliminate or modify those practices. It also means, however, that the elite institutions will remain elite, and they will always find ways to use the tools at their disposal to construct student bodies that reflect the expectations of their elite constituencies. The solution to the dramatic problems of inadequate K-12 preparation of large proportions of our young people for serious college academic performance is not likely to come from manipulation of the entrance protocols to elite colleges and universities.

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