

Rethinking the SAT: The Role of Standardized Testing in College Admissions

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
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1. Introduction

Standardized tests in college admissions date back to 1900 with the establishment of the College Entrance Examination Board (Beatty et al., 1999). This organization would later become known as the College Board, which gives the SAT and Advanced Placement examinations to thousands of students each year (Lemann, 2000). The original intent of these examinations was to determine whether students were prepared for the rigor of college work (Beatty et al., 1999). Elite colleges and universities were receiving applications from students who had completed secondary school, but their skills and abilities were not always reflected in their secondary grades (Ibid). Since then, more and more institutions have required the SAT or other standardized testing results for college admissions.

There are arguments for and against the use of standardized testing in college admissions. Some assert that qualified students will assuredly be accepted into some university, and the only purpose of the SAT is to restrict admission to highly competitive universities (Beatty et al., 1999). In other words, for most non-exclusive schools, standardized testing serves no purpose. An argument against that is that testing scores provide a common metric for students from different states, schools, and backgrounds, which is essential for determining a student's success at university (Strauss, 2019).

Despite this argument for standardized testing, many schools are shifting to make test scores optional for applicants. About 40% of accredited colleges and universities in the United States have made SAT and ACT scores optional (Strauss, 2019). The argument is that the schools have found no difference in academic achievement. Additionally, some schools noted an increase in student body diversity when test scores were made optional. At Wake Forest, ethnic diversity increased by 90% when the requirement of test scores was removed (Ibid). At the

University of Chicago, they saw a 20% increase in first generation, low income, rural, and veteran students (Ibid). In a 2014 survey of schools that have made scores optional, there was found to be no significant difference between the graduation rates and GPAs of students who submitted scores and those who did not (Kamenetz, 2015).

Standardized testing recently came into national consideration due to the Varsity Blues scandal in 2019. The Department of Justice discovered that parents of high school students were paying for their students to attend certain colleges by falsifying athletic records and facilitating cheating on standardized exams, including the SAT (Li & Mandell, 2019). Schools involved included Yale University, Stanford University, and Georgetown University, and more (United States Attorney's Office, District of Massachusetts, 2019). In total, over 50 people were charged with various crimes (Ibid). In many cases, cheating on the SAT allowed wealthy families to ensure that their students would be able to attend elite universities. This goes against the idea that the SAT is an unbiased way to evaluate students from different backgrounds. If students can pay to get a high score, then how can the SAT truly compare students from different socioeconomic statuses?

In the wake of this scandal, more people have considered alternatives to the SAT as it currently exists. Some examples of this are only taking the SAT once, weighting the score based on socioeconomic background, and completely removing the SAT as a college entrance requirement. However, it is difficult to compare these alternatives against one another. One potential method of comparison is utilitarianism, a form of ethics that determines right and wrong based on how much harm it causes society overall. However, when considering alternatives to the SAT, it is also necessary to look at human rights. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education both

consider post-secondary education a human right for qualified individuals. In this thesis, potential alternatives to the SAT are considered through both a human rights and utilitarian lens.

2. Utilitarianism and Human Rights

Utilitarianism is a form of ethics that determines whether an action is right or wrong by judging how much happiness or harm it causes (Gorman, Mehalik, & Werhane, 2000). When applied to society, it can be generalized to judging how much benefit or harm an action causes to society. It is in contrast to other ethical framework that emphasize an individual's happiness. This ethics framework was chosen because in the United States, college admissions has an impact on a wide range of people, from businesses to families. In order to consider the impact of standardized testing on this large network, utilitarianism was chosen for its emphasis on society as a whole over individuals.

The human right to higher education refers to the extent to which individuals can make a claim on post-secondary education, including both undergraduate and graduate studies (McCowan, 2012). Unlike utilitarian ethics, the human rights approach emphasizes individuals instead of society as a whole. This framework was chosen for its emphasis on individuals and can be contrasted with utilitarianism.

3. The Current System

In the United States, the College Board and the ACT are the organizations that administer college standardized testing. Both organizations are registered tax-exempt nonprofits (ProPublica, n.d.-a; ProPublica, n.d.-b). They are financially dependent on standardized testing. According to ProPublica, which collects data from the Federal Audit Clearinghouse, in 2017, the College Board had a total revenue of around \$1.1 billion and a net income of \$140 million (ProPublica, n.d.-b). About 94% of their revenue comes from their “program services” which includes administration of the SAT and AP exams (Ibid). In the same year, ACT Inc., which provides the ACT exam as an alternative to the SAT, had a total revenue of \$353 million and a net loss of \$3 million (ProPublica, n.d.-a). Like the College Board, 94.1% of their revenue comes from “program services” or test administration (Ibid). Based on these numbers, both nonprofits rely heavily on revenue from standardized testing. Thus, they have a vested interest in maintaining or expanding the existing standardized testing industry.

The stated mission of the College Board nonprofit is to “expand access to higher education” and “[promote] excellence and equity in education” (The College Board, 2018). The organization also “serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators, and schools” (Ibid). The ACT has a similar mission statement: the organization is “dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success” (ACT, n.d.). With respect to standardized testing, the ACT holds the view that:

“ACT scores are the only admission decision factor that provide a common, standardized metric allowing colleges to compare students from different schools, states and countries

on a level playing field. No other factor used in admission decisions can do that.”

(Strauss, 2019)

Although both the ACT and SAT are administered as college entrance exams, the SAT is the bigger and more popular exam. Thus, throughout the thesis, the College Board will be referred to over the ACT. However, the two are comparable and the analysis given applies to both exams.

University admissions departments are also heavily involved in standardized testing. Around 60% of universities in the United States require the SAT or ACT for admission. For example, UVA requires either the SAT or ACT, but states that “standardized testing is a useful but imprecise instrument” and does not have a minimum SAT score requirement (University of Virginia, n.d.). This makes the rationale behind the requirement unclear. For the 40% of universities who do not require the SAT/ACT, the reasoning is typically that they do not find the scores valuable for assessing the academic capabilities of students. The university admissions departments are a split on the issue of standardized testing, with some who support it and some who do not. Only some admissions departments directly benefit from standardized testing as a measurement of academic potential, where ideally they are able to pick students who will be successful at their schools. This gives them an advantage over schools who do not use standardized testing. Those schools lack a quick and easy way to filter through applicants, which increases the time they need to spend on each application and the manpower involved in admitting students.

Some individuals and companies have built careers around helping students prepare for SAT and ACT testing. The test preparation industry will earn a revenue of \$1.1 billion in 2019, a

2.4% increase from the year prior (IBISWorld, n.d.). Preparation for the SAT can range between \$10 for a book, and \$1,000 for an instructor-led class (“How much does SAT prep cost?,” n.d.). In 2018, about 2 million students took the SAT, and another 1.9 million took the ACT (Emma & Wermund, 2018). These students are an excellent market for the test preparation industry. The industry obviously benefits financially from the continued use of standardized tests: if the SAT and ACT were removed from university admissions requirements, it is unlikely that as many people would take these exams, and the industry would shrink.

Finally, high school students and their families are heavily impacted by standardized testing. These students are the ones who take the exams and are applying for college admissions. They are impacted by standardized exams because of the belief that a high score will help their admission, and conversely that a low score will prevent them from going to a good school. The College Board recommends that a student take the SAT at least two times (College Board, 2018b). Students who wish to improve their scores may take the exam multiple times. However, each SAT exam costs a minimum of \$49.50 (College Board, 2018a). That means that the SAT may place a financial burden on students and their families.

It is worth examining the relationships between these parties. The College Board depends on high school students financially, and high school students depend on the College Board for giving them an exam score that they can use to apply to college. Students who wish to improve their score may take the same test multiple times, or take a different test. The College Board benefits financially from this, and there is a commonly held perception that a better score may benefit a student by helping them get into an elite school. Some elite schools may use scores to screen out applicants, so a high score can help students proceed beyond an initial survey of

applications. However, standardized tests may be a financial burden on students and their families, so the College Board offers fee waivers for qualifying students.

University admissions departments may consider standardized testing scores from the College Board when admitting applicants. Many departments also superscore applicants, which means that their highest scores from each section are taken, even across different test sessions (College Board, 2018b). For example, a student who excels in the SAT Reading section on one exam and the SAT Math section on another version of the exam would have their two good scores combined and submitted as their final score. This practice means that both the College Board and admissions departments benefit from students taking the exam multiple times. The College Board benefits financially, and admissions departments get to see the best academic performance for some students. Superscoring also encourages high school students to take the exams multiple times in order to maximize their score for submission to university admissions departments.

Finally, the test preparation industry depends totally on the administration of these exams and their importance to high schoolers. Students who wish to do well on their exams may hire a tutor, attend classes, or buy practice exams, all of which are sold by the test preparation industry. Due to the high importance placed on the results of these exams, these services come in a wide range of prices, from a few dollars for a book to thousands of dollars for an in-depth class, which can be inaccessible to people of low socioeconomic status. Both in theory and in practice, this means that those of higher socioeconomic backgrounds have an advantage when preparing for the exam, as more resources are available to them.

A. Utilitarian Approach

The benefit to society of the SAT is twofold. First, it may allow for qualified individuals to attend elite universities, especially if they come from an underserved area that does not allow them to show their true academic potential. Second, it allows university admissions departments to quickly filter through applicants, saving them time and money. It also allows for them to process higher volumes of applications, which may encourage more people to apply to college in general.

On the other hand, the SAT may be a financial and psychological burden for many students. Test preparation for the SAT may start as early as the seventh grade (Kamanetz, 2015). High school students are also told that their entry to college is contingent on achieving a good SAT score. This can put intense pressure on students, both in high school and middle school. The SAT and test preparation specifically are both financial burdens as well. Although the amount spent on test preparation is ultimately the decision of a high school student and their family, the importance placed on standardized testing may encourage them to spend large sums of money on the exam. The Varsity Blues scandal, which involved huge amounts of money being spent for higher SAT scores, demonstrates the importance of standardized testing scores in college admissions as well as the lengths families feel they must go to in order to improve their students' scores.

B. Human Rights Approach

Is higher education a human right, and if so, is the current implementation of standardized testing an obstacle to fulfilling that human right? McCowan (2012) explores whether higher education is a human right or privilege by using conceptual legal and moral arguments. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that higher

education should be accessible to all but can be restricted by merit. Restriction based on merit and academic preparation ensures that all students will be able to engage meaningfully in their education. Article 4 of the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) similarly states that education should be accessible to all but can be restricted only based on “individual capacity”, or the academic potential of students. This accounts for students that come from low-resource areas and may not have opportunities for achievement available to them. Both of these state that higher education is a right similar to elementary education, but can be restricted. Neither declaration addresses the relative quality of the education. Thus, international law generally sees higher education as a human right, but as independent of the quality of instruction.

McCowan (2012) also justifies the right to higher education by characterizing it not only as classroom learning, but a learning experience and period of intellectual development that should be accessible to all. By considering higher education in terms of international law as well as a developmental experience, McCowan concludes that higher education is a human right that can be restricted based only on merit.

It can also be argued that higher education is not a right but a privilege, and still benefits society. McCowan (2012) notes an argument that while higher education is restricted, it benefits society economically by taxing those individuals and generally by using their expertise. Hashi (2012) asserts that while higher education is a privilege, it is accessible to all through online courses and scholarships. While these are valid arguments, they fail to address the idea that higher education is a developmental experience that everyone should have easy access to, in the same way that they have access to elementary education.

If higher education is a human right, does the SAT restrict access to it? The role of the SAT is to restrict admission to highly competitive universities by giving preference to students

with high scores (Beatty et al., 1999). However, for universities outside of the elite, high scores do not serve much purpose in admission aside from a basic academic assessment. Some schools do not require the SAT at all. While other barriers may exist outside of standardized test scores, such as inadequate academic preparation or economic status, the SAT itself does not inhibit students from accessing general higher education. It does prevent some students from attending elite institutions and receiving a higher quality education. However, this is not addressed in international law, and it is certainly possible to develop intellectually at a non-elite institution. Thus, the SAT does not prevent people from achieving their human right to higher education.

4. Alternative Solutions

A. Not Allowing Retakes

One potential solution is only allowing a student to take the SAT once. This would remove the practice of superscoring. However, it does not account for the fact that some students have more time and money to put towards test preparation than others.

i. Utilitarian Approach

This would benefit high school students in some ways. They would not have to spend money on multiple test attempts. It would also benefit students who cannot afford to take the test multiple times, as everyone is in the same situation. It might harm the test preparation industry since students do not have to study for retakes. On the other hand, it might not impact that industry at all, as students still have to prepare for their single, high-stakes exam. Beyond this, this approach is very similar to the current standardized testing system.

ii. Human Rights Approach

A single chance to take the SAT might be seen as infringing on people's rights to use their money as they please. In a way similar to how political donations are a form of political activism, it can be argued that the freedom to pay for multiple attempts at the SAT is important and should not be infringed upon. However, this seems unrealistic. The Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 has been in existence for decades (Federal Election Commission, n.d.). A similar restriction on using money for standardized testing does not seem unreasonable. Although it may provoke complaints from some, this new addition does not seem to be a deterrent to human rights. Aside from that, the human rights analysis of this approach is similar to the analysis of the current system.

B. Weighting SAT Scores

Lemann (2000) suggests weighting SAT scores to account for socioeconomic background, school quality, race, and other factors.

i. Utilitarian Approach

Lemann found that this form of weighting does account for the shown influence that socioeconomic status has on SAT scores. In this way, it provides a more accurate depiction of someone's academic capabilities regardless of their background. It might also remove some of the stress from students. If they are aware that factors out of their control that are shown to influence SAT scores, such as the school they go to, their socioeconomic status, and parental engagement, are accounted for, they could feel less pressure to perform as well as their more privileged peers. It could also be a benefit to university admissions departments, as the score will better represent a student's capabilities. Aside from that, changing to this approach would not have much impact on test preparation or the College Board.

ii. Human Rights Approach

This approach could be a major human rights issue. Although it would help people from lower socioeconomic status, it would actively harm students from higher classes. Due to circumstances out of their control, their scores would be lowered while their peers' scores were raised. It is possible to draw parallels to affirmative action policies here, though a full analysis is out of the scope of this work. However, similar to the human rights discussion of the current system, in the grand scheme of college admissions this approach itself may not be enough to actually claim a human rights violation. This would not prevent students from attending higher education, only limit admission to elite institutions. All the same, it is certainly more of an impediment of human rights than the current system.

C. An Adaptive Exam

In this alternative, Kamenetz (2015) suggests that the SAT would be administered on a computer. The test would be able to adapt to the student's answers and adjust to their academic level. The difficulty and order of questions would depend on the answers to the previous question, and not necessarily be in order of difficulty.

i. Utilitarian Approach

Computer-based testing like this is a huge opportunity for the test industry. The College Board and the test preparation industry would have the opportunity to sell tests, textbooks, and preparation materials to many students simultaneously. It would also provide university admissions departments with more information about individual students. For example, the test would be able to record how long a person spent on one question. Even if students do not score particularly well on the exam, having this information could help university admissions departments by giving them a more holistic view of their applicant, including their test-taking thought process.

ii. Human Rights Approach

This could benefit individual students by allowing them to get a better score on the exam. A test that adapts to their previous answers could make them feel more comfortable for the duration of the exam, allowing them to improve their scores. On the other hand, it could prevent students from showing their true potential. If they miss a question early on, that could set them back for the rest of the exam. Determining the algorithm for picking questions could be a difficult decision, and one that might inadvertently favor some students over others. Additionally, the test has the potential to provide more information about how individuals take the test. While this could be a benefit by allowing university admissions departments more

information about students, it can also be seen as an invasion of privacy, especially if someone's thought process is unconventional and might be misinterpreted by others. It could be a detriment to admissions.

D. Performance Assessment

In this approach, Kamenetz (2015) calls for abolishment of standardized testing altogether. Instead, the SAT could be replaced with performance assessments, or an analysis of the student's overall performance in high school, not their results on an exam. This alternative emphasizes completion of tasks similar to "real-world" work instead of essays or standardized testing.

i. Utilitarian Approach

One downside of this is that it makes it difficult to compare between diverse groups. This adds to the workload of university admissions departments, which would suddenly lack a standard to compare students with. Additionally, a student's performance might be heavily based on what resources were available to them in high school, which would not be equal for all applicants. It also places much more work on high school teachers. Depending on their school district, these teachers might already be overworked and underpaid, and adding more work to their days does not seem beneficial. It would also be very difficult to integrate with a test-based system like the one we currently have, raising questions of who will have to do the integration and how that will impact college admissions during those years of transition. On the other hand, it would encourage students, even in high school, to be engaged in more "real-world" activity, which would benefit them later as productive members of society. It may also cost less money to schools. Instead of paying for test preparation, they can then spend money on things like professional development.

This approach would cause major issues for the test preparation industry. Without tests at all, the industry would likely collapse, putting some people out of jobs and almost certainly dissolving entities like the College Board and ACT. The economic ramifications of this approach would be huge, especially when compared to other alternatives.

ii. Human Rights Approach

This approach would certainly benefit students in some schools more than others. Since not all schools have the same resources, it might further the gap in achievement between well-funded and underserved schools. Additionally, it would benefit some individuals more than others. At the high school level, it might be difficult to treat all subjects equally. Teachers might find it easier to let students have creative freedom in the humanities, but not necessarily in math and science. This would harm students who are more inclined towards math and science, as they would not be able to show their full potential due to the limitations of their school.

5. Conclusions and Future Work

This thesis presents an analysis of the current standardized testing system as well as four alternatives, through the lenses of utilitarianism and individual human rights. While the current system harms high school students financially and psychologically, it does support the College Board and the test preparation industry, so removing the SAT would cause economic harm. The current system also does not violate human rights: while it may keep people from attending elite universities, it does not prevent them from attending university at all. Community colleges and the like are still places of intellectual development that can benefit those looking to further their education. An alternative to the SAT would benefit students. However, none of the alternatives discussed here are perfect solutions that preserve individual rights and do no economic harm to the test preparation industry. Although no ideal alternative exists, it is still important to recognize the limits of the current system in order to acknowledge its impact on university admissions.

Some opportunities for future work are studying the impact of standardized testing on college athletes, focusing on disadvantaged groups, comparing the role of standardized tests for graduate school with undergraduate schools, and focusing more on the specific case of the college admissions scandal. There is also the potential to discuss standardized testing with affirmative action policies. With respect to the human rights discussion, there is an opportunity for work in comparing the quality of an online and in-person degree, and whether an online degree fulfills the human rights requirements for higher education. Finally, I suggest that future work focuses on not only the current role of standardized testing in higher education admissions, but also analyzes trends and potential future developments in that industry, with the end goal of analyzing what standardized testing should be allowed to become.

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