

# Forbes

## The "Improved" SAT -- Hey, Let's Play The Masters From The Ladies' Tees, Too

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To considerable fanfare, the College Board announced on March 5 that it was making changes in the SAT. David Coleman, president of the College Board stated that the SAT “had become disconnected from the work of our high schools.”

The most significant changes to be made (the new test will not be given until 2016) are: lowering of the difficulty of the math section which will henceforth only cover linear equations, functions, and proportions, elimination of the penalty for wrong guesses, downgrading the vocabulary section to focus more on words that college students are likely to encounter, the essay section, added in 2005, will now be optional for those students willing to stick around for another 50 minutes, and SAT takers will have access to free online help in preparation through Khan Academy.

Will the changes make the SAT a better means for colleges to decide whether a student is a good academic fit for the school? I think not. If anything, the lowering of the difficulty level will make it less useful – much like playing The Masters from the ladies’ tees at Augusta National would make the tournament less of a test for the best golfer.

What is really behind the changes in the SAT is the need for the College Board to fend off the attacks that its big “product” is unfair and contributes to “social injustice.” The message to the egalitarian critics of the SAT is, “We hear you and are acting in accordance with your just criticisms!”

As for the notion that the test will be better in an evaluative way (rather than in a public relations way), that’s very doubtful. Cato Institute’s Andrew Coulson contends here that “dropping the more arcane words and more advanced mathematics...seems counterproductive and institutionally suicidal.”

Coulson points out that tests are built around Item Discrimination Analysis, a measurement of the difference between the percentage of high-performing students who got the question right and of low-performing students who got it right. Questions with a high Discrimination Index are more useful and likely to be retained.

The problem is that the elements of the SAT that are going to be jettisoned are the ones that have the highest DI values. That's especially true of the math. Coulson notes that a study authored by two College Board employees concludes that (in his words) "the DI value of SAT mathematics questions is usually the *strongest contributor to the test's ability to predict college success*—by a wide margin."

Perhaps the changes are more analogous, then, to not having the golfers play the holes where scores are most likely to be above par.

Besides the desire to try to appease the egalitarians, there is another motive at work in this—dovetailing the SAT with Common Core. David Coleman also happens to be one of the chief architects of the national K-12 standards known as Common Core. A few years ago, it appeared that the rails were greased for Common Core adoption in every state, but opposition has been steadily mounting.

Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars says that the SAT changes are Coleman's way of throwing Common Core a life preserver. In this essay on Manhattan Institute's *Minding the Campus*, Wood does an excellent job of connecting the dots. "Common Core," he writes, "is a redefinition of what it means to be 'college ready.' An SAT refurbished to match what the Common Core actually teaches instead of what colleges expect freshmen to know will go far to quiet worries that the Common Core is selling students short."

Putting aside the supposedly noble intentions of having the SAT do more to promote social justice by boosting poor and "underrepresented minority" students, what will these changes really accomplish? Leftists are so used to judging policy changes based only on their professed intentions that the College Board probably figures that it will get lots of credit just for talking the talk.

Does the unfair old SAT keep many deserving young people out of college? No, it doesn't. Almost everyone who graduates from high school can find some college that will accept him. At many schools, the SAT or ACT scores of incoming students are depressingly low, but they accurately reflect the very poor K-12 preparation they've had. They need remedial coursework in English and math, as a consequence of many years of educational malpractice and neglect. Changing the SAT can't change that.

Our problem isn't that we are keeping good students out of college. Rather, in our mania for putting as many as possible into college, we admit many who have scant preparation for or interest in academic pursuits. Even if they manage to graduate (and with the dumbed-down curriculum and inflated grades we so often find these days, it's quite possible for weak, disengaged kids to get their degrees), they are apt to find themselves working in "high school" jobs.

To whatever extent the "improved" SAT makes it possible to lure a few more of those students into college, that's not something to applaud.

But what about the students who will look marginally better on the new SAT than they would have on the old version? Won't that help some of the poor and minority students get into a better college than otherwise—one that is more selective? Isn't it possible that the student who would have just missed getting into, say, Michigan State, now has a score that's high enough and therefore won't have to "settle" for, say, Central Michigan?

Yes, that is possible, but the advantage of going to a more selective school is greatly exaggerated and can even be a disadvantage. Bigger, more prestigious institutions often give their undergraduates an inferior education compared with smaller, less well-known schools. Shuffling students around, enabling some getting into Dream School A, while others must content themselves with Backup School B, has very little long-run impact.

The College Board's brass may believe that they are doing something to make the U.S. more fair and equal, but that belief is on a par with similar utopian notions, such as that raising the minimum wage is good for the poor or that the economy becomes more vibrant through government spending.

Peter Wood's conclusion about all of this is accurate and devastating: "We are embarking on a great expansion of the left's long-term project of trading off our best chances to foster individual excellence for broadly-distributed access to mediocre education."