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The Fixation of American Testing

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Testing has become a way of life; an activity that spans a student's entire educational career. The acme of American testing arrived when President George W. Bush introduced the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act in January of 2002. It was at this juncture that testing became a tool which could be used to determine a student's grade promotion, intelligence, and future capacity as a functioning constituent of society. Tests are generally given in a standardized format, and are commonly the only measure of a student's knowledge and skill base. These tests; however, are far from infallible and contain within them many inherent flaws.

Research has shown that "African-American and Native American students score, on average, 12-15 points lower than European-American students on standardized IQ tests. Hispanic American student's scores fall between African-American and European-American students, whereas Asian-American student's scores tend to be at the same level as scores from European-American students. It has been argued that standardized tests and testing procedures are culturally biased toward middle-class European-American students, because many of these tests measure knowledge that is more likely to be within the realm of a European-American student's life and school experience. Taking into account the cultural diversity of many American high schools, any bias should be seen as unacceptable. The SAT exam which has the unintended function of social stratification highlights this very fact. The gap between white and minority student achievement has continued to increase over the last decade, with both African-American and Mexican-American student's losing the most ground.

Cultural bias is not the only reason that minority students have a lower success rate on standardized tests. Some research suggests minority students may not be as intrinsically motivated as their more affluent and white peers. Many ethnic groups are stereotyped into one or more categories, with the majority of these categories being negative. Some students believe that regardless of intrinsic motivation, success is simply not a reality because of membership in a particular ethnic group. Additionally it has been argued that minority students might associate academic achievement on tests to be "acting white" rather than associating these actions with their own ethnic group. Avoiding academic success prevents potential rejection and intimidation from members of their own cultural group.

Testing has become so ubiquitous that colleges, students, parents and even potential employers, all perceive their validity as absolute and without question; the reality though, is far different. In May of 2000, the daughter of a Minnesota lawyer learned that she had failed the math portion of Minnesota's Basic Standards Tests, a test published by National Computer Systems. The family contacted the Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL) and waited for two months before being allowed the test for formal review. The family and employees of CFL along with 45,739 Minnesota students found that there were errors on the original answer key. After investigation it was determined that an employee of National

Computer Systems had used the wrong answer key to score the tests. At the end of the investigation over 7,000 students had their grades changed from a failing grade to passing. Another example involves the Educational Testing Service. The company identified an error on a 1999 administration of the SAT exam which lowered the scores of 1,500 students by as much as 100 points.

Problems with high stakes standardized tests are not limited only to employee mismanagement and oversight. In 1987 the administration of the New York Bar Exam challenged one exam question as ambiguous. The question was reviewed and eventually removed from the exam. All the exams taken over a three year period (1985-1987), had to be rescored changing the results of 111 individuals from a failing grade to a passing grade. This type of error was also found on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) where it was determined that a multiple choice question had more than one answer. In Virginia and Nevada errors were found to be a result of test equating, a statistical process used to make the scores of a test comparable from one year to the next. Through the testing process, testing contractors determine the points needed for passing the current year's test, which is equivalent to the passing score on that test the year before. In both cases, the passing score was set one point (or approximately the equivalent of one question) too high. After the state educators identified the miskeyed question, the scores of 12,000 high school sophomores increased and 142 students who had failed the test, passed.

Standardized multiple choice tests are frequently used to determine student proficiency in individual subject matter, or for more holistic reasons such as grade matriculation, state requirements and graduation. We have come to believe that these tests are accurate measures of student learning, and I would be the first to admit that quite often this is in fact true. But this occurs only when curricular objectives are aligned with accurate and unambiguous questions. This begs the question, are standardized tests effective measures of student curricular proficiency and knowledge? Standardized multiple choice tests force students to consider absolutes, yet life rarely offers a singular resolution. This fundamental process coerces students to focus on "what's on the test" information, rather than deeper, more cognitive reflection. As a general rule standardized tests are answered on a bubble sheet, with letters indicating specific responses, generally A through E. When students complete these sheets they are taught to look for markers, or other indicators of test construction. An example of this can be seen if a student were to answer "B" three times in a row; students are taught that test makers would not generally construct three questions in a row with the same answer. Standardized tests therefore do not necessarily reveal what a student actually understands and knows, but rather only proves how well they have been taught to complete a generic test.

Testing has created a culture that assumes students are more prepared and able to cope with the rigors of postsecondary education and employment. Research shows on the other hand, that there is no clear indication to support that standardized tests are a credible measure of academic achievement or intellectual capacity. Consider for a moment that students complete hundreds of tests during k-12 education, yet we are still seeing a constant efflux of graduates and non-graduates who are destined for a life of mediocrity and minimum wage employment. If successful completion of standardized tests equates to learning, how do we explain this inconsistency?

NCLB the moniker for standardized testing has turned the United States into a country obsessed with categorizing both schools and students through the use of inherently inaccurate quantifiers. These "high stakes" tests have created an environment where schools are being labeled as failing, causing many to close in the process. I'm not a genius but closing schools

doesn't seem like a credible answer to the countries educational woes. To make matters worse, after all the dust has settled it is the student who suffers the most.

Many students who fail these tests are forced to repeat grades, refused admission to elite universities and mentally branded for life. Students, teachers and school administrators have been sequestered to endure this stigmatism for way too long, a paradigm shift away from our testing fixation is needed, and soon. Students have an inherent right to an education that is stimulating, equitable and supportive of a career in the global economy. The current system of testing and re-testing no longer suffices for what is required of American education.