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Our University – ACT

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Our University – ACT

For many, these three letters may spell something that happens in front of an audience or television camera. For millions of high school graduates seeking entrance at a university of their choice, they are the bane of their existence in the brief interlude between high school and the rest of life.

The ACT and the SAT – these are letters without names anymore because the idea of achievement and aptitude in and of themselves are seen as negative by many university leaders. They were created as a way to level the playing field in college admissions with data, rather than social status. The founders believed equal access to college would provide, through unfettered opportunity, a better world. James Conant, a President at Harvard during the thirties was a strong proponent of this new view of merit-based admissions.

Fast forward to 2009. In the early twenty-first century, many want to level the playing field in college admissions with something other than data. The value of standardized testing is being diminished. Now college presidents claim that the very thing that Conant and others thought was leveling the field, actually creates unfair advantage. Wake Forrest and other universities say they cannot achieve a healthy, diverse student body with socially biased ACT or SAT tests.

The tests are unfair. People who have wealth perform better on them. People who live in large houses perform better on them. People who live in affluent suburbs perform better on them.

If you ranked all ZIP codes in the nation by mean family income - this is easy as J. C. Penney and L.L. Bean already do this to decide where to send catalogs - and listed the ACT takers side by side, nearly perfect correlation would exist. People who come from “privilege” do better on these tests than those who don’t. They also drive better cars, wear genuine leather, and rarely buy knock-off bags and watches on street corners.

These tests all create exclusivity, the same kind that makes a high school half-back who runs a 4.3 second 40 yard dash more valuable on a football field than one who runs a 4.9 second 40 yard dash. Speed is a form of merit, just like the ability to score well on a standardized college entrance test.

In both cases there is the presence of a more or less objective measure. There are some half-backs who might be a bit slower and actually be better football players. Likewise there are some entrance examination test takers who might score a little lower but still make an excellent contribution.

The student with the 34 on the ACT and a 4.3 in the forty makes both admission officers and football coaches salivate. Not one or the other in this kid’s case, but

a wholehearted effort to bring them in at any cost, no matter the socio-economic status or zip code.

The admission officers need to always look at a combination of indicators to determine fitness for study. The ACT, class rank, high school GPA, courses taken, activities participated in, creating a flexible formula of sorts, will give a pretty good indication of potential success in the university.

No university president or admissions office can argue that. History denies them the ability to do so.

If the current disaffection with standardized tests for their bias leads to throwing away other measures of potential in college admissions, American higher education is in very deep trouble.

The exclusivity of one indicator is wrong, but throwing all objective measure is tragic.

If you do not perform well on standardized tests here is a suggestion, one that I took myself.

Go to a community college, take demanding courses, and prepare for the university. If you perform, you will get accepted to a university or find a good career that brings you satisfaction based on strong performance and ability; you will have succeeded.

You, your work... bias-free.