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We Need More Tests, Not Fewer

By JOHN D. MAYER MARCH 10, 2014

DURHAM, N.H. — LAST week, the College Board announced that it was revising the SAT in an effort to make it more acceptable to test-takers, teachers, college admissions officers and the public more generally. That's a tough objective. The SAT tells us something about how smart we (or our children or students) are. Test-takers who receive lower scores than they had hoped for are likely to be dismayed at the news — and concerned about their academic future. It's no wonder that it's hard to discuss the test dispassionately.

Even before the announcement of the SAT's redesign, commentators were discussing the test's limitations. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Elizabeth Kolbert described its questions as superficial: "Critical thinking was never called for, let alone curiosity or imagination."

The SAT isn't perfect. Like any test, it can be misused, can miscalculate a person, and may reflect unequal educational opportunities. But what interview or grading process is free from such concerns? The SAT provides a valid measure of a person's ability to reason through verbal and mathematical materials, a skill required in college and in our increasingly information-oriented workplaces. Although there are conflicting reports on the issue, a study published in the journal *Educational and Psychological Measurement* in 2011 found that the SAT can meaningfully add to the prediction of a student's first-year college G.P.A., above his grades in high school alone. The fact that the SAT can, during a morning's testing, help predict this is, to me, an astonishing achievement that cannot be ignored.

Research indicates that mental tests do predict people's patterns of behavior in consequential ways. For instance, graduate students' G.R.E. scores are correlated with the ratings faculty members later give them, their likelihood of remaining in a program, and the impact of their publications (as measured

by citations). And tests like the NEO-PI-R that measure social and emotional traits like conscientiousness and agreeableness can predict a person's longevity and likelihood of staying married.

In addition, tests are our only way to study and attempt to understand ineffable mental qualities like intelligence, openness to experience and creativity. They help make the mysteries of mental life tangible. Neuroscientists use them to discover who excels in particular mental abilities, and to try to identify the parts of the brain responsible.

We cannot afford to ignore tests because they fall short of perfection or make us uncomfortable.

Some colleges, in response to the pushback against the SAT, have de-emphasized it, along with the ACT, and are allowing students to opt out. But there's a better way to make the SAT more acceptable in the long run: We should expand the types of tests we use so as to more fully reflect what students can do.

What if, in addition to the SAT, students were offered new tests that measured more diverse abilities? For future artists or musicians, there are tests that measure divergent thinking — a cornerstone of creativity largely ignored by the SAT. For future engineers, there are tests that measure spatial reasoning. And new measures of “personal intelligence” — the ability to reason about a person's motives, emotions and patterns of activities — may also tell us something important about students' self-knowledge and understanding of others.

Colleges and universities could create a list of tests that have been proved to fairly and reasonably accurately measure ability, and students could pick ones in which they hoped to excel.

We can't expect these tests to predict first-year college G.P.A. as well as the SAT does. But they may predict other outcomes of importance, and help colleges to recognize the diversity of abilities in future students.

By allowing students to opt out of testing, we deprive colleges and universities of an important tool to compare applicants, and suggest to young people that self-knowledge isn't important. By adding tests, we send a different message: that information about ourselves is helpful to know, and that people are multifaceted and multitalented.

John D. Mayer, a professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire, is the author of “Personal Intelligence: The Power of Personality and How It Shapes Our Lives.”

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