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Wednesday, March 5, 2014

In Response to the SAT Being Changed March 5, 2014

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Now that more students start taking the ACT, the SAT announces it will "change."

I have been text-bombed! One dozen messages telling me the same thing: "Have you heard? They changed the SAT? See: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/education/major-changes-in-sat-announced-by-college-board.html?_r=0"

Old students, new students, future students.

Let the anxiety begin. The first line of the freshly released New York Times article reads, "Saying its college admission exams do not focus enough on the important academic skills, the College Board announced on Wednesday a fundamental rethinking of the SAT, eliminating obligatory essays, ending the longstanding penalty for guessing wrong and cutting obscure vocabulary words."

The College Board is advertising a newer test as a way to address social injustice, but this is just a farce attempting to hide the fact that College Board wants to make more money. Coleman says, “It [social injustice] may not be our fault, but it is our problem.” It’s a little too easy for Coleman to excuse College Board from taking any blame for social injustice because they have administered a test for 81 years that’s virtually impossible for most students to test in the top 10th percentile, unless they can afford tutoring and materials. College Board has, neither in the past, nor it seems like for the future, taken steps to make the test approachable without prep. Social injustice has existed in American history since before the inception of America – so why is the College Board interested in leading a crusade against social inequality just now? Coleman’s statement is just a smokescreen for College Board’s desire to make more money. 1.8 million students opted to take the ACT last year, revenue College Board could have reigned in, had the SAT been designed like the ACT in the first place. College Board started out as having an economic monopoly as the only college entrance examination, but in the 1960s, the ACT emerged as a response to the SAT, long identified by many as a classist, and arguable racist test. It’s wildly suspicious that College Board has started to care about those criticisms now, only after a legitimate competitor has emerged, pointing out issues that have been around for decades. Sounds a little bit like “all of a sudden” syndrome to me.

Let’s get real and analyze line by line what College Board is “saying” versus what it is “doing” to recreate the SAT.

Saying: “David Coleman, President of the College Board, criticized his own test, the SAT, and its main rival, the ACT, saying that both “have become disconnected from the work of our high schools.”

Doing: The reality is that the SAT and the ACT are rival companies, competing for their share of the multibillion dollar college prep test pie. The ACT was virtually unheard of until the past decade, when the SAT revamped its test, and to its own surprise (and dismay) the ACT became more popular. Check out this awesome article, released recently, stating that more students are taking the ACT than the SAT for the first time:

<http://www.myfoxtwincities.com/story/19635441/more-students-take-act-than-sat-for-first-time>

Saying: “In addition, Mr. Coleman announced new programs to help low-income students, who will now be given fee waivers allowing them to apply to four colleges at no charge.”

Doing: Coleman is referring to fee waivers allowing students to send scores to colleges, not the actual Common Application, which is how students submit their personal information and essays to colleges. This means students *do* still have to pay to apply to college and Coleman isn’t helping students do it for *absolutely free*. His statement is purposefully misleading. Furthermore, College Board does currently offer fee waivers for low-income students, but they’re ridiculously difficult to attain. Most of the kids I’ve worked with don’t know how to get a fee waiver because College Board doesn’t do much publicity for how to attain

one; it's not in their economic interest to do so. If a student is somehow able to navigate the bureaucratic nightmare of getting the fee waiver, there's usually never enough available in any given year, as students must request a new fee waiver each time they want to take the SAT. For example, at Forest Hills High School, students aren't allowed a fee waiver for more than one sitting of the test. If a student does manage to miraculously discover how to obtain a fee waiver and they're allowed to have one, College Board has been known to mail the waiver at an incredibly inopportune time for the student to take the test. For example, a local public high school guidance counselor I've worked with closely for many years, was in a state of panic upon realization that no fee waivers were mailed to his school four weeks leading up to the SAT. Also, a student can currently opt to send their SAT score to one college, if they agree to send it the day they take the test, meaning a student would agree to send the score before they know what it is. In the deeply flawed system of testing, any anxiety can drastically lead to a score reduction. Although students have the option to submit SAT scores to colleges the same day they sit for the test, I heavily advise them not to do this. You never know what can go wrong on test day, which is why I always say that it's better to wait until you get your score to submit it. After all, the vast majority of schools allow for SAT score choice. Here is a 50-page list of schools that participate in "score choice":

<https://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/sat-score-use-practices-list.pdf>. Coleman's purposefully vague statement fails to mention how exactly this system of "applying to four colleges for free" will work, and by extension, whether or not he's actually making a difference

for low-income students. Coleman's plans sound exactly like initiatives College Board already has in place; initiatives that we know do nothing for low-income youth.

Saying: "And even before the new exam starts, the College Board, in partnership with Khan Academy, will offer free online practice problems from old tests and instructional videos showing how to solve them."

Doing: "Old" test questions are no longer as helpful if the test is being revamped. How about some new ones? Like identical in format and content to what we expect to see on test day? Does Mr. Coleman intend to say that he will authorize the release of math problems on previous tests that will also be on the new version of the SAT? Or he will authorize the release of older math problems that the new SAT will not include? What about practice reading questions? Coleman claims that the new reading section will be called, "evidence-based reading and writing." Does that mean reading passage questions from previous SATs are no longer useful, even though that's a majority of what Khan Academy has access to right now and can make available to students who cannot afford private tutoring? The reality is that College Board is just trying to keep up with the times. By advertising their partnership with Khan Academy, College Board is trying to say, "most students taking the test are internet-savvy and we're attempting to become the same way." But Khan Academy has already posted detailed answers to every single released SAT on its website. The fact that College Board is even endorsing Khan Academy just proves what a coachable exam this really is. Hey, after all, you can watch a few videos online and learn how to

crack the test. Oh, and let's not forget all those annoying and unskippable 20-60 second advertisements YouTube is inundated with when a student is watching a Khan Academy video. Plus the benefits of having access to Facebook and YouTube while watching Khan Academy videos will do wonders for test scores and students' concentration, won't it? In fact, at Kweller Prep, we have students deactivate their Facebook accounts and agree to limit their time spent online for the months leading up to their college entrance exams. I don't know about you, but I am quite tempted to "browse the web" once I am on it. Why does partnering with Khan Academy matter if it will just lead kids getting distracted? Sure, it creates more access to prep material to students who couldn't otherwise afford it, but what good does that do if the prep material is presented in a way that is not conducive to studying? Coleman is advertising a partnership with Khan Academy as proof of College Board's "forward thinking" and "progressive" approach to education but all it will result in is a failed attempt to address social inequality, in addition to providing ineffective test material.

Saying: "The changes coming to the exam are extensive: The SAT's rarefied vocabulary words will be replaced by words that are common in college courses, such as "empirical" and "synthesis."

Doing: Where do I begin? Since when is it okay to replace words like "abstruse" with "empirical"? How exactly does that make the vocabulary section easier? Why would a low-performing student know what "abstruse" means as opposed to "empirical"? What metric system is College Board using

to determine which words are “college-level” and which are not? I would also like to add that, now, all the money parents, educators, and test prep institutions spent on SAT books will be wasted.

Saying: “The use of a calculator will no longer be allowed on some of the math sections.”

Doing: Wow! So basically the College Board went from allowing high tech TI-89’s and to no calculators at all. See: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080828150359AAyupWi>. Here, a student claims that with the use of a \$200 calculator, she scored a 650/800 on the math, her worst section. One parent recently told me that her 5th grader is allowed to use a calculator for in-class exams and homework. There is not even one 10th, 11th, or 12th grade student who is not allowed a calculator for homework, class, and tests. In fact, most have to purchase \$100-\$200 ones for daily math classes. Good luck to the College Board if they think that eliminating calculators will help students replicate “the work of our high schools”, as Coleman aims to do with the SAT, after kids have used calculators for years to get through math classes, but can’t use them during the SAT.

Saying: “...the scoring will revert to the old 1600 scale, with a top score of 800 on math and what will now be called ‘Evidence-Based Reading and Writing.’”

Doing: The scoring going back to the “old” method does not surprise me at all. U.S. News and World, Report (aka: “the college bible,” which releases the Top College Guide each year never converted over to the 2400 scale. Neither did any of the colleges. Many schools just refused to accept the

writing component all together, as it has confused students for years. The writing section of the SAT asks students to improve sentences and identify sentence errors. Students tend to crack this part of the SAT by memorizing antiquated grammar rules that they're unlikely to follow in their own writing, and then identify which rule they need to recall to get the question right. The writing section also includes a 25-minute essay, which seems paradoxical because no student is ever asked to write an essay in 25 minutes, so how would he or she be able to successfully write one, much less during an anxiety ridden test? Most students crack this part of the SAT by including buzzwords that they're told will get them a 12/12 (the highest possible score), regardless of what the content of their essay reflects. Few colleges look at the writing section to determine admissions because they know it's not an accurate reflection of a student's ability to write. What's more, the writing section of the SAT more closely resembles "white" upper-class English, as opposed to say, African-American vernacular. Many linguistics studies cite different dialects of English as they originate from various cultural and socioeconomic groups in America, putting some groups at an advantage over others.

Saying: "The optional essay will have a separate score."

Doing: This is in direct competition with the ACT, which offers an optional essay as well. As an instructor, I think removing the SAT essay is a mistake. The whole point of the SAT essay is to see if you can write a clear well thought out essay in a tightly-timed (25 minute) setting, using proper grammar, punctuation, spelling, a range of sentence

structures, and apt vocabulary. See:

<https://sat.collegeboard.org/scores/sat-essay-scoring-guide>.

Also, there have been cases where the College Board essay was compared against student's college application essay, to determine how polished the college application essay was by counselors, teachers, and parents. By not including a writing sample, the College Board is certainly not testing how "college ready" a kid is, but rather relieving itself of the hard work and extra expenses entailed of having to pay two readers grade the essay.

Saying: "It is time for the College Board to say in a clearer voice that the culture and practice of costly test preparation that has arisen around admissions exams drives the perception of inequality and injustice in our country," he said in a speech Wednesday in which he announced the changes. "It may not be our fault, but it is our problem."

Doing: Costly test preparation? Really? Let's not throw stones. The College Board makes millions of dollars selling it's own books! They charge an additional \$60 for online software with six tests, and charge \$19 for each time a student wants a copy of his or her SAT test. The blue book- a ginormous manual College Board condones as the only "Official SAT Study Guide"- is half useless. Literally one entire half of the book is filled with jargon, that's intended to review the skills necessary to ace the test, but ends up confusing readers because everything is so poorly explained. Then, the second half of the book features ten real SAT exams, where we found at least one-dozen typos. College Board charges an additions \$10 for an SAT blue book with a

CD (useless!) and every single page, without exception, has in crystal clear print that it is ILLEGAL to photocopy any pages. Oh, and my favorite part is that from the ten exams in the College Board blue book, not even one test or one section has explanations! College Board, you are to blame for kids needing test prep! College Board has no right to bash on the test prep industry, when it's their lack of openness that's led to it's creation. Don't hate what you create! If kids merely relied on your bluebook, they would be in a state of despair. My friend in San Francisco, whom I respect, tried to create a low cost and detailed answer key to the College Board blue book for kids. Instead of getting a thank you, he got a cease-and-desist letter from the College Board, who obviously didn't want to share a piece of their high profit margin pie.

See:

<https://www.chillingeffects.org/fairuse/notice.cgi?NoticeID=1518> and <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1450556973?tag=saso-20&camp=14573&creative=327641&linkCode=as1&creativeASIN=1450556973&adid=0ZFSCXK2X3QMTPLFGZ9MQ&>

Saying: “Some of the changes will make the new SAT more like the ACT, which for the last two years has outpaced the SAT in test-takers and is increasingly being adopted as a public high school test by state education officials. Thirteen states use it that way now and three more are planning to do so. The ACT has no guessing penalty, and its essay is optional. It also includes a science section, and while the SAT is not adding one, the redesigned reading test will include a science passage.”

Doing: Again, the SAT is saying “please keep paying \$51 to the College Board not ACT.ORG!”

Saying: [With regards to the now optional essay,] students will get a source document and be asked to analyze it for its use of evidence, reasoning and persuasive or stylistic technique.

In essence, College Board is admitting that they designed a bad test. That statement discredits students who spent years honing their critical reading, writing, and math skills to ultimately demonstrate on the SAT. Now we're being told that the SAT is a poor assessment of those skills? What about students who have taken that test is years prior? Are the students that scored less than 1500/2400 more college-ready than students that earned a perfect score? What about students who are current high school juniors that are gearing up to take the SAT in few days and have spent months prepping for it? Scenario: say a student preparing to take the SAT this coming March 8th toiled away the last few months thinking about nothing but this test. Now say that, as a result of his efforts, the student went up 400 points. Now he is seeing a mass production of literature claiming it's a bad test? How should the student feel about the jumps he or she made in their score? About the importance of it's validity in the college process? College Board created an SAT-culture, and now College Board telling us that there are flaws to it and that there are legitimate reasons not to engage in it.

So what have we been doing this whole time?