Standardized Testing in the Midst of Human Diversity

Jeremiah Starr

This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program at the Center for Faculty Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2012.

Introduction:

The current educational system utilizes standardized testing to assess students. An over-arching dilemma centers on whether or not standardized testing should be utilized if is viewed as existing in an unfair state and fails to accommodate human diversity. There is nothing standard or absolute in life and the same can be said regarding high stakes testing within education. The academic community has endured a lengthy debate on the appropriateness of standardized testing within such diverse contexts. This paper explores key aspects of the debate and provides areas of interest that relate to elite universities. Analysis of standardized testing practices in American schools revealed an opportunity for those on both sides of the argument to acknowledge the existence of weaknesses within their faction. Yes, standardized testing is needed to measure a student’s potential for academic success but, the current system of implementation and shrouded secrecy exasperates the already sensitive social issue within academics. This short essay will address a few key points within the argument and display the complexity of the discussion within the academic community.

Limitations:

In an effort to support open honesty I have chosen to present the limitations of my standardized testing analysis up front within the presented paper. Furthermore, my existence as a minority from the Deep South and meager upbringing, make this text susceptible to unconscious bias. My success despite mediocre standardized test scores and status as a minority may subliminally place my analysis in a defensive posture within the academic discussion. These limitations have been addressed and will not detract from the presented text. Acknowledgement of these weaknesses improves content validity and expands the academic discussion in a neutral manner.

Current Standardized Testing Debate in the Academic Community

The academic community appears to be split regarding the effectiveness and fairness of standardized testing within academics. Educators have not fully addressed the issue between human learning and cognitive sciences (Pellegrino & Chudowsky, 2003). Additionally, there are numerous scholars and practitioners who assert that
standardized testing is both fair and equitable (Au, 2008; Rouling, 2010). While this is true a number of reasons have surfaced that attempt to destroy the strangle hold that standardized testing has within our current educational system. Evidence has shown that standardized testing may inaccurately predict minority success in academics (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005). Test preparation strategies and opportunities cast a negative light on any results retrieved through standardized testing (Alon, 2010). Open resistance to standardized testing is now taking form within educational institutions (Hursh, 2005). Additionally, alternative aptitude tests are being analyzed for implementation in academic institutions (Stringer, 2008). These factors make the standardized testing argument essential to any institution of higher learning that desires to provide equitable academic opportunities for students. In light of these facts, elite universities continue to engage in countless endeavors to diversify the student composition. Many institutions place considerable importance on standardized test scores and have inevitably chosen as side within the argument.

**Areas of Interest for Elite Schools**

Cursory examination of elite university’s standardized testing positions renders key areas of interest. Undoubtedly, these institutions utilize standardized test scores and placement test scores within their admissions deliberation process. Therefore it is important to express alternative interpretations of these academic testing practices. Some educators assert that utilizing high-stakes testing results may contribute to social injustice within the American education system (Syverson, 2009). This detracts from the tireless efforts that these schools take in an effort to display diversity and fairness. A large number of American households do not earn enough income to send their children to the elite test prep courses. Applicants with honed test taking skills have a marked advantage over less prepared students who cannot afford the augmented educational support. In other words, the standardized test may not holistically measure the required aptitude for academic instruction and may in fact simply report the student’s prowess regarding test taking capabilities. Another key area of interest centers on minority recruiting criteria and policies. Elite colleges have been known to utilize subjective admission preference practices (Espenshade, Chung & Walling, 2004). Dependence on standardized test scores forces elite institutions to utilize selection processes that propagate a perceived inequitable social system. Utilization of standardized testing and placement tests fail to consider the distinct differences that exist within minority groups (Hicklin & Meier, 2008). A credible alternative would be to lessen the influence of standardized testing and focus on accessing an applicant’s critical thinking skills (Cress, 1996).
The Way Ahead

The road ahead is clear for elite schools and their legendary commitment to excellence will remain the academic roadmap in academia. Educators should analyze the success of schools and students that have abandoned standardized testing practices and maintain an “optional only” stance regarding standardized testing as a measurement tool (Epstein, 2009). Furthermore, stopping the current secrecy and dishonesty in standardized testing in relation to college admissions preferences is paramount to preventing reverse racism and continued social injustice by means of education. (Thernstrom, H & Thernstrom, S, 1996). Is it American to deny a student the opportunity to receive an education from an elite university due primarily to both race and standardized test scores? Open acknowledgement of potential test bias would solidify theses institutions as holding a position of moral / social high-ground within the academic community (Aguinis, Culpepper & Pierce, 2010). Identifying these test flaws substantiates the proposed downgrade of influence regarding standardized test scores in elite schools.

Conclusion

Utilization of standardized testing which fails to acknowledge human diversity may inadvertently require educational institutions to participate in reverse racism while attempting to manufacture diversity on American campuses. Failure to acknowledge the limitations of standardized testing in diverse contexts only propels an educational system that is perceived by both the minority and majority as existing in a contradictory state. The real social injustice is truly the fact that in 2012 there is still a reluctance to openly discuss issues surrounding inequality within a free nation! Every citizen should be afforded the opportunity to learn at an elite institution. The current standardized testing policy is not aligned with human diversity and may be what some would classify as divisive in nature!
Annotated Bibliography:


The article presents an alternative to standardized testing as we know it. Unfortunately, the proposed measurement tool is deemed less effective but, raises awareness regarding the need to revamp the current standardized testing system that is perceived by many in education as being inequitable. The article lacks sufficient support and needs further documented data.


Culpepper and Davenport’s (2009) text highlights the inability to properly gauge student aptitude / potential when considering race & ethnicity. The variables outnumber the constants and the author’s article displays the unique task that academic institutions nationwide undertake each year. Given the complexity of college admissions criteria it is important to unearth the inability to concretely measure a potential applicant. The article successfully displays the uniqueness of American society regarding student potential.


Jalomo’s article focuses on the assessment of minority student performance. The author provides needed contrasting perspectives which cast standardized testing practices in a more negative light. Evidence depicting minority students as under
achievers on standardized tests supports the assertion that there is potential bias within the testing system and reveals social factors that hinder minority students. The article does not reveal new data and re-iterates commonly held beliefs on both sides of the standardized testing argument.


The US Department of Education’s Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups presents needed quantitative data to the presented paper. The paper primarily analyzes qualitative rhetoric with a lack of measurable evidence. However, the measurable evidence is vivid within the text and displays the lopsided results of standardized testing within America.


The author’s (2011) text addresses the recent addition of college admission essays. Distinct differences are evident within essays written by students of diverse races/ethnicity. These differences support the complexity of the standardized testing system and displays the need for alternative assessment techniques. The title is a graphic reminder of the need to both acknowledge diversity in education and ensure diversity considerations are part of the educational assessment system.


Murray ushers in evidence of what is perceived as sinister motives behind standardized testing. The text also presents the political considerations that are ingrained within our
nationwide standardized testing practices. Additionally, Murray’s text does not fail to reveal the gender problems that still exist within our educational system.


Higgins’ text presents sound rationale for continued utilization of the current standardized testing system / practices. The text adds balance to the presented paper and displays the rationale behind the early conception / implementation of standardized testing practices in America. The text assists in eliminating commonly held assertions that standardized testing was implemented to maintain an American class system.


Nieli attempts to display the contradictory nature of our current American educational system. The author unearths buried research that is damning to both non-supporters and supporters of affirmative action practices. The author’s text raises the question if it is ever ethical to discriminate the majority for the minority and vice versa? Academic institutions that think they are doing the “most good” may in fact inadvertently participate in systematic inequality.
References


