Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Pd:\_\_\_\_

*Th*e *SAT*: A *Cas*e *Stud*y *i*n *Testin*g

As you read the following, think about the issues related to intelligence testing (e.g., the distinction between aptitude and achievement tests, the concepts of reliability and validity, and the question of bias in testing). **On a SEPARATE SHEET of lined paper, answer the following question before you read: Do you believe SAT scores should be used in college admissions or the awarding of scholarships. Why or why not?**

Psychology Professor/College Administrator Richard C. Atkinson notes that after World War II, U.S. colleges and universities gradually adopted standardized tests as part of their admissions process. Most schools used the SAT; some used the American College Testing Program (ACT).

The College Board, which (as noted in the text) administers the SAT and the Advanced Placement program, has made a series of changes in the test since its beginnings. The original SAT became the SAT I—a 3-hour test that emphasized verbal aptitude but added a section on math skills typically taught in grades one through eight. The College Board also added 20 one-hour SAT II tests to measure a students’ achievement in specific subjects, including history, chemistry, and the foreign languages. As Atkinson explains, most colleges required only the SAT I, although some also required two or three SAT II tests. Typically, when the SAT has been mentioned in the media, the reference has been to the SAT I.

Throughout its history, the SAT has been surrounded by controversy. Carl Brigham, a Princeton psychologist who created the original SAT, modeled the test after earlier IQ tests and regarded it as a measure of innate mental ability. Even Alfred Binet, who thought such tests could be useful in a clinical setting, rejected the notion that they provided a meaningful measure of mental ability that could be used to rank individuals of normal intelligence.

In serving on the Board on Testing and Assessment (a board of the National Research Council that advises the federal government on testing issues), Atkinson was distressed that members of the College Board touted the SAT as a true measure of intelligence and seemed oblivious to research suggesting that achievement tests were a better predictor of college success than aptitude tests. Also troubled by what he thought was his grand-daughter’s waste of study time preparing for the SAT, Atkinson drafted a paper arguing that admissions tests should not try to measure “innate intelligence” but should focus on achievement, that is, what the student had actually learned in high school. In addition, he argued that such tests should include an essay component and should cover more advanced mathematics. Finally, he argued that a crucial aspect of admissions tests was to convey to students, teachers, and parents the importance of learning to write and the necessity of mastering at least eighth-through tenth-grade mathematics.

In 2001, the unpublished paper became the basis for Atkinson’s famous speech. As president of the University of California, he announced that he would recommend that University of California, one of the largest public educational systems in the country, no longer use the SAT in its admissions process. Once a distinguished visiting scholar at ETS, Atkinson himself took several SAT sample tests, hoping to find some value in them. His conclusion? “America’s overemphasis on the SAT is compromising our educational system.” He argues that when students do poorly, neither parents nor teachers can point to specific concepts they need to work on. At a time when states are stressing standards and accountability, the SAT seems tied to neither. He proposes new standardized tests linked to state standards so that anyone who masters the curriculum can succeed.

Research findings at the University of California lent support to Atkinson’s claims. A study that examined the effectiveness of high school grades and various combinations of SAT I and SAT II scores in predicting college success found that the SAT II was a far better predictor of college grades than the SAT I. The data also indicated that the predictive validity of the SAT II is much less affected by differences in socioeconomic background than is the SAT I. Finally, the data indicated that the best single predictor of student performance was the SAT II writing test. Atkinson notes that, given the importance of writing ability at the college level, it should not have been surprising that a test of actual writing correlates strongly with college grades.

Largely in response to Atkinson’s criticisms, the trustees of the College Board announced in late June 2002 major changes to the SAT I. Beginning in spring 2005, the revised SAT I (the SAT Reasoning Test) includes a 25-minute essay requiring students to produce an actual writing sample, a more substantial mathematics section, and a reading comprehension section that does not include verbal analogies. The scoring categories are now critical reading, math, and writing. The writing section has two sub scores, one for multiple-choice questions and the other for essays. Many observers concluded that the College Board met Atkinson’s challenge by recasting the SAT Reasoning Test as an out-and-out achievement test of reading, writing, and math. Atkinson himself states, “I believe this is an ideal solution that reflects the changes called for in my speech.”

There seems little doubt that the College Board (a powerful group of 5200 educational institutions) is using the new SAT to mold the U.S. secondary system. By requiring an essay, it is telling schools to produce better writers. By including advanced algebra, it is calling for a curriculum that emphasizes mathematics. The SAT, some observers (e.g., Cloud, 2003) note, could help produce a national curriculum without the passage of a single law.

The College Board’s 2008 SAT Validity Studies were the first to reveal information about the students who have taken the SAT since the 2005 addition of a required writing section. Data from 150,000 students in 110 four-year colleges and universities suggest that the SAT is an excellent predictor of academic performance in the first year of college. Interestingly, the new writing section was shown to be the single best predictive section of the test. “Writing as a college-level skill is a crucial asset for student success, an important message reinforced by colleges that require admissions tests with a writing section,” said College Board President Gaston Caperton. “Colleges not requiring an admissions test with writing are overlooking one of the best predictors of college success to which they have access. Writing should not be optional.”

Among the most significant College Board findings were the following:

* The SAT proved to be a better predictor than high school grades for all minority groups (African American, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian).
* Writing was the most predictive section of the SAT for every group of students except ESL students.
* For all students, the SAT was almost as predictive as four years of high school grades.
* The best predictor of first-year college GPA was a combination of high school GPA along *wit*h SAT scores.
* Grades were slightly better predictors of academic success at public or less-selective colleges; SAT scores were slightly better predictors at private colleges or more-selective colleges.

Atkinson, R. C. (2005, May). College admissions and the SAT. *AP*S *Observer*, 15–22.

Cloud, J. (2003, October 27). Inside the new SAT. *Time*, 48–56.

College Board (June 18, 2008). SAT Studies Show Test’s Strength in Predicting College Success. Retrieved on September 17, 2008 from http://www.collegeboard.com/press/releases/197359.html.

Goldstein, A. (2001, February 26). Is this the end for the SAT? *Time*, 62–63.

Markheim, M. B. (1999, September 1). Students to get SAT credit for ‘striving.’ *US*A *Today*, p. 1A

Markheim, M. B. (2002, June 26). SAT exam up for big revision, *US*A *Today*, p. 1A.

**Respond to the following after reading. Must be at least a half of a page to get credit: Do you believe SAT scores should be used in college admissions or the awarding of scholarships. Why or why not?**