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### Testing Standardized Testing: Pass or Fail?

Situation: Standardized Testing is a method used by many educational systems all around the world. This topic has been continuously discussed and debated upon, and until now, the use of standardized testing remains to be a polarizing issue. In line with this, I am writing a speech to my Writing and Rhetoric classmates to tell them about my side on this issue. Their knowledge on the topic is varied; some may be quite knowledgeable on the topic while others may be less informed. Ultimately, I want to inform them of my stance: because standardized testing is more beneficial than harmful, they should continue to be used in educational systems.

Good day to everyone! As we come together near the end of our very first semester here at Notre Dame, it seems fit that we first take a quick look back at all that we have gone through so far. We remember all the tests, the essays and lab reports that we've (hopefully) diligently spent our time and effort on. We call to mind the moments that we've shared in the dining halls, classrooms and dorms. We look back on the first days of college when we met some of the members of the Notre Dame community: our dormmates, professors and friends. Going even further, we think back to when we were going through the grind of applying to various universities across the United States and all around the world.

Indeed, we have already come a long way in our college journey, and I think for most of us, it all began with one thing: the standardized tests we had to take. Now, since we're students, I'm certain that we all have different opinions about the standardized testing that we've undergone. Some of us may support it, and some of us may think that it's time for it to go. To be completely honest, before, I believed that standardized testing is a detrimental method and that its use should be discontinued. However, upon further reading and reflection, my opinion on it

has changed. I now believe that because standardized testing is more beneficial than harmful, it should continue to be used in educational systems.

### *Why Talk About Standardized Testing*

Before I go into my stance on this topic, I think we first should ask ourselves, “Why should we even bother talking about standardized testing?” The answer is simple: it is a large part of student academic life. In fact, in the United States alone, the typical student goes through around 112 standardized tests from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade; that makes the average about eight tests annually (Layton). That is definitely a lot of tests for students to take per year!

Now, you may be thinking, “Well, we’re in college. We’re probably done with those standardized tests so it shouldn’t matter that much anymore.” Despite being college students, however, we will still be involved with standardized tests. Personally, I plan to apply to medical school, so I still have to take the Medical College Admission Test (or the MCAT). Some of us in this room perhaps want to do the same or plan to continue on to law school and other postgraduate studies. So, it’s safe to say that we’re still not done with standardized testing.

### *Objections to Standardized Testing*

Now, before anything else, I think that it’s important to acknowledge objections to the use of standardized testing. For one, many of those who oppose standardized tests claim that they are simply about memorized information. However, this is not true; these kinds of assessments do have the ability to test beyond simple facts. For example, standardized tests have critical thinking questions. Herbert Walberg of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education writes that standardized questions exist wherein test-takers choose the best application of concepts or the most apt interpretation of a set of ideas. Those kinds of questions do not just require knowing facts; they also involve analysis and careful thinking to arrive at the correct answer.

Another common argument against standardized testing is that it is biased against non-English Language Learners (or ELL). This claim is extremely valid and should be taken into very serious consideration. However, there already exists a solution to this: standardized tests have versions for non-English speakers. In the United States, these students can take state reading and language tests in their original languages for as long as three years. This gives ample time for these students to learn English and become more proficient at it (“What”). While they do that, however, they can still be tested on the same content as everyone else. In this manner, ELL students are provided equal footing along with their English-proficient counterparts.

Standardized tests are also said to be unable to, “provide a direct and complete measure of educational achievement” (Koretz). This is true: standardized testing measures only a few aspects of educational achievement. However, it should be noted that the main purpose of standardized testing is not to measure every single aspect of a student’s academic performance. Instead, these tests measure some of the crucial basics of intellectual capability like logic and comprehension. In other words, it pays attention to only a few aspects, but it focuses on the most important ones. Though standardized testing is very concentrated, it still says a lot of important information about the intellectual capacity of a student.

#### *The Numerous Benefits of Standardized Testing*

Despite these claims against standardized tests, that fact remains that this method of testing holds a lot of benefits. First of all, using standardized tests provides a fair measure for academic skill. Content-wise, these tests are the same for all students who take it. From the format to the very questions in each section, tests of the same kind (i.e. SAT, ACT, MCAT, etc.) are completely identical. Through this, students are given an equal level of difficulty. No one gets a harder test than anyone else; all test-takers are evaluated by the same exact standards.

Also, in terms of grading, error and bias are minimized. Most tests are scored by machines, not people. In machine-graded tests, any sort of error as a result of human grading is reduced significantly. On the other hand, for the standardized tests that are graded by people, the grading processes for these are heavily regulated. For instance, in the the writing portion of the SAT, scores given by two readers are based on a rubric. The three categories in this rubric, namely Reading, Writing and Analysis, have strict and specific guidelines for scores (“SAT”). Additionally, the essay readers themselves are extensively trained to be consistent graders, and must also receive certification from the Educational Testing Service (“Become”). Thus, the scoring is still very objective for tests graded by people.

Now, because the tests are the same for all and the grading is objective, error and bias that arises from human grading is largely diminished. As Aaron Churchill of the Fordham Institute in Ohio puts it, in essence, standardized tests are, “intended to provide an accurate, unfiltered measure of what a student knows.” Hence, the use of standardized tests can provide a fair method of measuring academic skill.

Second, another benefit of standardized tests is the ability to guide the improvement of academic weaknesses while promoting information retention among students. In terms of fostering improvement, tests like the SAT or the ACT provide information about whether each student is doing above or below the accepted level for certain skills (e.g. rhetorical skills or understanding complex texts). While identifying the strenghts of students, the test results can also pinpoint areas where they are weak. With this information, there is more concrete guidance as to which abilities of a student should be exercised more and improved on.

To demonstrate this, personally, when I took the SAT last year, I found that my weakest area was in writing. I kept this result in mind as I started attending Notre Dame. Therefore, I

decided to sign up for this Writing and Rhetoric class first before taking any other classes that were heavy in writing, such as Theology and Philosophy. Now that I have almost finished this class, I honestly feel much more confident and improved in my writing skills. In this way, my results on a standardized test pinpointed my weak areas and guided my improvement on them.

Additionally, tests can help students retain the information they encounter. Drawing from personal experience, we all know this to be generally true. When we prepare for exams, professors usually provide us with practice tests because it repeatedly exposes us to the material that we learn in class. When we are exposed to concepts and solving strategies more often, we're more likely to remember them.

As a matter of fact, scientific evidence supports this. Researchers have studied a phenomenon called the "testing effect" where performance improves through test-taking. In fact, a study tackling this was conducted by Henry Roediger III and Jeffrey Karpicke at Washington University St. Louis. They found that taking a test, "on material can have a greater positive effect on future retention of that material" (181).

What does this mean for standardized testing? It means that these tests are actually helping students remember the information they learn in the classroom. Because they are being tested on concepts they have learned before, they will have a higher chance of remembering those materials in the future. Thus, whatever they encounter in the classroom is more unlikely to be forgotten over time; students retain information better. Overall, standardized tests promote academic improvement in weak areas as well as contribute to how well students remember the things they learn.

Third, aside from benefitting students, schools can also utilize standardized test scores to provide bases for comparison between potential applicants. Educational institutions like law

schools, medical schools and colleges typically use standardized test scores to evaluate applicants. In fact, around 78% of colleges take standardized test scores into consideration when reviewing student applications (“Are”). Even our very own University of Notre Dame takes these scores into account for applications (“Evaluation”).

But, why do schools rely on standardized test scores anyway? The reason is that applicants to these educational institutions originate from different schools from places all around the world where there are varying systems of education. Hence, candidates (especially international ones) come from schools with different sets of standards. There thus exists a disparity in what the grades of applicants actually mean. An “A,” for instance, in one school may not amount to the same level of intellect as the same letter mark in a different school. As a consequence, there is a need to have a system of comparison, in which the intellectual levels of applicants can be judged by the same criteria.

Now, of course, this is where standardized testing comes into the picture. It helps solve the problem by measuring how well students perform given the same assessments. Hence, the results of standardized tests can show how candidates fare against their competitors in terms of basic skills such as logic and cognition. Because of this, educational institutions can make better decisions as to who are the smartest and most qualified among their pools of applicants. In this way, schools can use standardized test scores to compare potential students.

Fourth, not only can standardized tests evaluate students, but also they can be used to approximate the performance of schools and thus, contribute to their improvement. Matthew DiCarlo of the the Albert Shanker Institute describes how this can happen. He writes that the standardized test scores of students can, “get some approximate idea of *schools’* contribution to that performance.” He also suggests that how much the school contributes to student

performance can be, “gauged using growth – that is, how much progress students make while attending a given school.”

In other words, over time, changes, or lack thereof, in scores of the students can tell how effective a school is at educating. Consequently, with this feedback, they can identify and focus on teaching strategies that need improvement. They can also maintain education methods that promote the growth of their students. In this manner, the performance of students on standardized tests can approximate the performance of schools, which in turn can help the schools become better.

Lastly, to make things even better, standardized tests are financially worthwhile. Recent statistics show that in the United States, an estimate of 0.25% of K-12 spending goes to fund standardized testing every year (“Into”). As I have already explained, standardized testing can yield plenty of information for both students and schools. For how much that standardized testing can yield, 0.25% can be considered an extremely low percentage of education budget to spend. Ergo, standardized testing is giving a lot of bang for our buck; the money we spend on it is not wasted at all.

### *In Summary*

Certainly, standardized testing is an important issue to discuss because it involves the educational well-beings of many students around the world, and as I have described, it offers a lot of benefits. It provides a fair measure for academic excellence. It helps guide improvement in academic weaknesses of a student while promoting better information retention. Also, it provides a way to gauge potential applicants for learning institutions. Aside from providing information about students, it can also help approximate the performance of schools and thus contribute to

their improvement. Additionally, standardized testing can even provide all of these things at a relatively low price.

Because of all of these benefits, I believe that education systems should continue to use standardized tests. Through supporting its use, we can improve the welfare of both students and schools. Indeed, by continuing to implement standardized testing, we possess a very powerful tool to educate.

Thank you all very much for taking the time to listen to my speech. Have a wonderful winter break and happy holidays!



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