

## Another high school test question

Would adding essays to the SAT make the test more accurate or be unnecessary?

It has been said that nothing in life is certain except death and taxes. For college-bound students in America, taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or some form of standardized test is also all but a certainty. In the 2001 school year, more than 2.3 million students took the SAT. Because many students have so much at stake, the controversy over changing the format of the SAT is one of national concern.



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A strong argument can be made that the SAT is the most important test many students will ever take in their culmination of 13 years of education. The SAT alone is often the determining factor in whether colleges will grant or deny a student's acceptance, the amount of scholarship money one will be awarded, and whether or not the student will be allowed to pursue the major of their choice. Therefore, it is of extreme importance that the SAT be what standardized tests are intended to be: unbiased tests scored according to objective standards that allow students of different ethnicity, socio-economic conditions and educational background to compete on an equal playing field.

The largest proposed change in the SAT is the addition of an essay that must be written in response to a prompt. That may not sound like a very large change, but for a multiple choice test that has remained virtually unchanged since the 1940s, adding an essay question is equivalent to a format overhaul. Critics of this change cite concerns about the imminent difficulty of humans rather than machines scoring approximately 2.3 million handwritten essays without compromising its objectivity. As the argument goes, any human grader is subject to error and cannot possibly be as impartial as a machine.

But the College Board already offers several standardized tests that utilize handwritten essays, such as SAT II writing test and various Advanced Placement (AP) tests. According to the College Board, more than four million handwritten essays from AP tests were graded in 2001, compared to a potential 2.3 million written essays from the SAT. Therefore, essay grading of this magnitude is not only realistic, but is in fact already being done.

The College Board currently contracts Educational Testing Service to score its various exams. ETS then hires roughly 10,000 teachers and professors, who gather en masse in facilities such as gymnasiums to read and grade each essay. In order to ensure impartiality of the grading process, each essay is reviewed by at least two different graders. Most universities, Texas A&M included, acknowledge the legitimacy of AP exams by accepting the results of the test as college credit. If essay-format standardized tests are seriously biased or untrustworthy, then colleges and universities across the country have been duped into believing that the results of AP exams are valid.

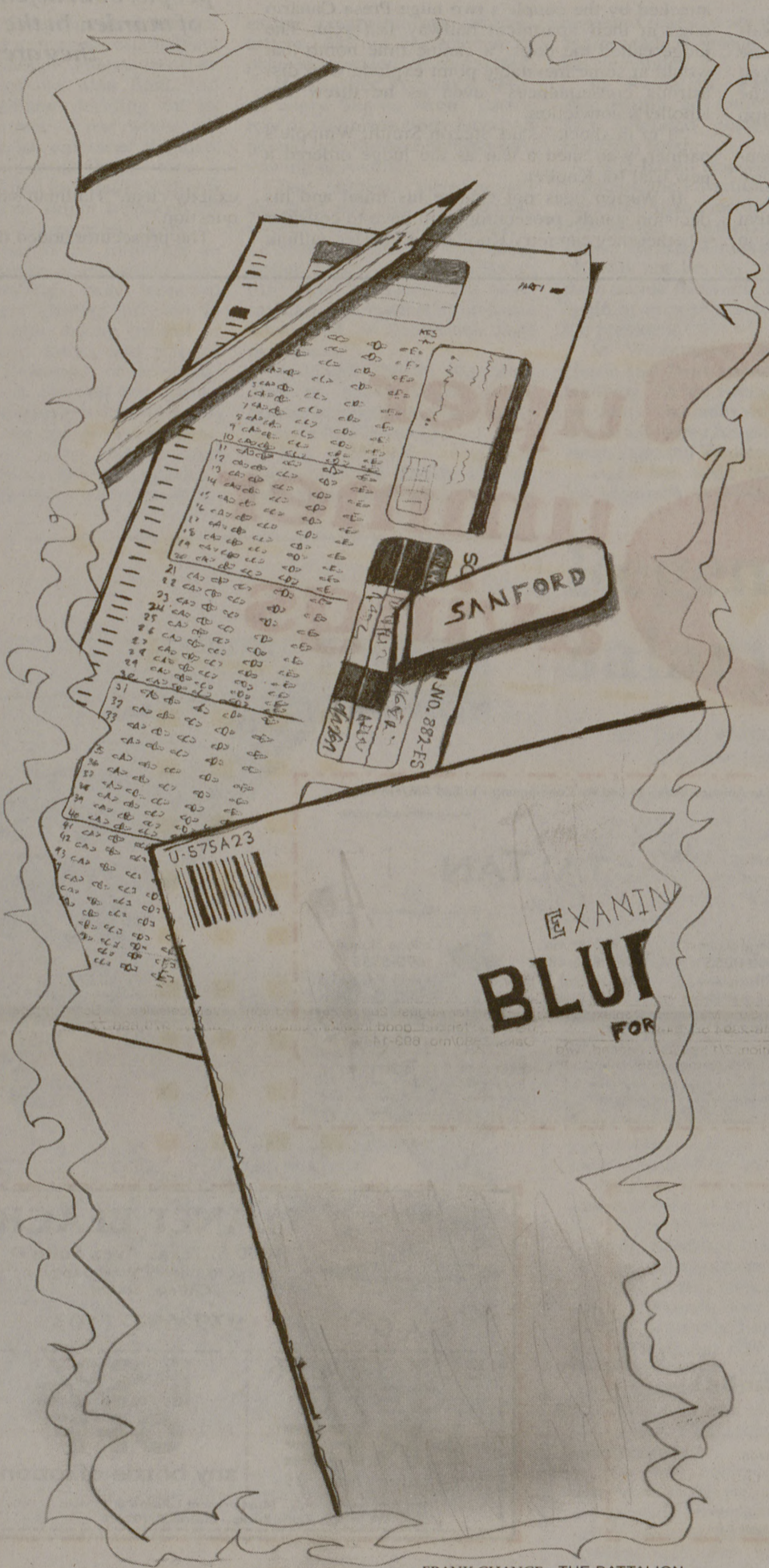
In actuality, the current form of the SAT is potentially unfair and biased, as evidenced by one's ability to manipulate their test score. The Princeton Review is a renowned SAT prep class. On their website, their score-improving strategy is clearly advertised — beat the test. Instead of trying to re-learn 13 years worth of testable information in a few weeks, the Princeton Review teaches its clients how to predict the answers to a multiple choice test. The service promises they can teach anyone this strategy and that it works; anyone who takes their course is guaranteed to improve their SAT score by at least 100 points. In fact, most students who take the Princeton Review class improve their SAT score by 140 points, and 25 percent of those who take the course improve their score by a whopping 256 points; out of a possible 1600 points, this improvement is extremely significant.

If everyone had the opportunity to take the Princeton Review or one of the many other SAT preparatory courses, then the results of the SAT might be more accurate. But the majority of American families simply cannot afford to spend large sums of money on a review class, especially in the wake of the impending costs of putting a child through college.

An essay test, on the other hand, produces results that are nearly impossible to manipulate; the only way to succeed on this type of test is to genuinely possess writing skills and abilities. In the words of Eva Baker, UCLA professor and co-director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, "If there's a writing test that helps kids get into college, then schools are going to spend more time writing, which can't be a bad thing."

Standardized tests such as the SAT are an enormous part of the application and acceptance process for colleges across the United States; the importance of national equality in college entrance tests cannot be emphasized enough. Granted that reformatting the SAT to include an essay question will undoubtedly be accompanied by unprecedented challenges in grading, the immense benefits that students and colleges will certainly reap from an unbiased, accurate portrayal of what a student has actually learned before entering college is worth whatever logistical headaches may ensue.

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FRANK CHANCE • THE BATTALION



ANDI BACA

In an effort to test students on a broader range of subjects, the College Board has proposed to add an essay portion to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). However, adding a new section to the SAT will cause more harm than good to the more than one million students who take the test annually.

The most significant reason why an essay portion should not be added to the SAT is grading accuracy. These hand-written essays must be graded individually. This becomes problematic because no two graders think exactly alike and the scale which they are grading on cannot clearly be defined. Whereas one might think an individual essay is great, another might think it is only mediocre.

Also, by adding an essay section, a long test will get even longer. The SAT already takes over three hours for students to complete. According to CNN, adding an essay portion to the SAT will add at least 30 minutes to the test time. The SAT, which can secure or eliminate a student's spot into college, are moving further away from a real depiction of a student's skills and towards a student's worst nightmare.

Another reason the College Board should not add an essay portion to the test is because students can take other tests specifically for writing. The College Board also offers the SAT II writing exam. Students who wish to pursue a degree requiring writing can take this test along with the SAT. With other tests to choose from that emphasize writing, adding a writing portion to the standard SAT is an unnecessary change.

Another fault with adding an essay section is that according to CNN, adding a new portion to the test will increase the cost students must pay to take it. An essay portion on the SAT will require more staff to grade the exams, especially a costly staff to grade the essay portion.

Supporters believe students will benefit from adding the essay portion to the SAT. CNN said females, as well as upper and middle class students are likely to benefit the most. If the College Board is trying to help students' chances, then the test should be reconfigured to include many more subjects than it does. The College Board also believes that adding an essay portion will allow students a way to demonstrate their skills.

If a student's skills come in the way of an essay, they might do well, but realistically, someone's skills go far beyond an essay question. If the SAT wants to see students' abilities, then they should allow them the freedom to perform any task. With an added essay section, the SAT will not benefit those students who have talents other than writing.

Before the College Board decides to add any other sections to the existing SAT, they should truly consider the consequences of adding an essay portion to the SAT.

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## United States must help stop AIDS devastation

Every week in Africa, a population the size of the Texas A&M student body dies of AIDS and an equal population becomes newly infected. Unless the wealthier countries of the world become more involved, the disease could wipe out an entire generation of people.



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According to the National Institute of Health, 40 million people are affected with AIDS worldwide, and 70 percent of them live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Some countries have been absolutely devastated. For example, over one-third of the population of Botswana and one-fifth of South Africans have the disease.

About three million people die every year of HIV or AIDS, and due to a lack of prevention programs and medication, an equal amount contract the illness. It is estimated that by 2010, 40 million children will have lost at least one parent, and 16 million will have lost both.

Almost one million of the new infections are children, and most of these cases result from mother-to-child transmissions in the womb. The number of these infections could be cut down with an increase in the availability of the drugs AZT and Nevirapine. A pregnant woman taking AZT during her last week of pregnancy or taking a single dose of

Nevirapine during labor has been shown to reduce the transmission.

However, African governments simply do not have the money to buy the anti-viral medications.

AIDS is not the only problem.

Malaria and tuberculosis cause the death of almost three million people yearly.

Malaria disproportionately affects children. It kills one child every 30 seconds; almost two million children die every year of this preventable disease. The rate of tuberculosis infection is increasing due to AIDS. As AIDS weakens a person's immune system, they are more susceptible to tuberculosis and die faster.

The Sub-Saharan African countries most affected by the AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis epidemics have promised to devote at least 15 percent of their yearly budgets to improving the health of their citizens, but this pledge is almost impossible to keep. These countries must repay \$15 billion a year, which amounts to over \$40 million a day, in International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans, which leaves little money available for health care and education. Many activists believe that the best way to help Africa is by dropping the debt they owe, but that is not likely to happen.

Africa's best hope is foreign aid, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, tuberculosis

and malaria, but so far, pledges to the fund have been dismal. The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS estimates at least \$10 billion is needed to effectively fight and prevent the spread of the three diseases that claim over six million lives a year. Only 20 percent of the needed money has been raised, and only half of it will be going to Africa.

While the president's budget provides a substantial amount of funding for U.S. AIDS cases, which account for only 2.5 percent of the world total, international funding is lacking. The United States has pledged \$750 million to fight the 39 million international AIDS cases this year, but this amount does not go far enough.

This month the Senate attempted to increase this pledge by an additional \$500 million, but the proposal was scaled down to \$200 million under pressure from the Office of Management and Budget. The Bush Administration is expected to offer more aid soon, but, according to *The San Francisco Chronicle*, organizations such as the Global AIDS Alliance do not expect the proposal to match what was abandoned.

One problem up to now has been a general lack of awareness to the extent of the epidemic, but that is quickly changing. Despite recent criticism of celebrity involvement in social

issues, U2 front man Bono has been instrumental in securing the funding increases that have occurred so far. Nicknamed "the pest" by his White House contacts, Bono and other celebrities are reaching a broader audience than these issues would normally touch.

His trip last month to Africa with Secretary of Treasury Paul O'Neill resulted in a considerable amount of press coverage from CNN to MTV to Christianity Today, and he is not stopping. Bono, with the help of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has created a new non-profit organization to help the crises in Africa called DATA (Debt, AIDS, and Trade for Africa). With his prominence and popularity, he can force more change.

With the devastating effects that AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis are having on African nations, world leaders — especially in America — should be more involved in preventing the spread of the diseases and helping to manage the cases that exist. Increasing our support of programs like the Global Fund would lead to others following our example and help prevent some of the thousands of deaths that occur daily from these diseases.

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