DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 021 929 UD 006 260

By- Kendrick, S.A.

VERBAL ABILITY: AN OBSOLETE MEASURE!

Pub Date Mar 68

Note- 5p.

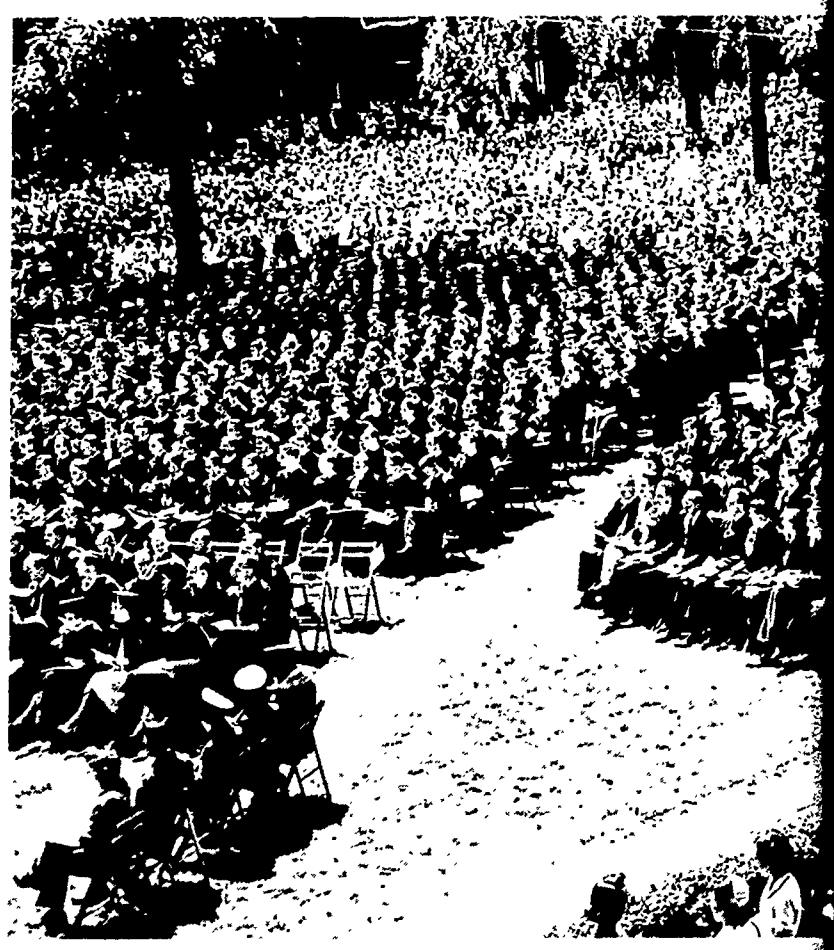
Journal Cit- Council Journal; v6 n6 Mar 1968

EDRS Price MF- $0.25 HC- $0.28

Descriptors- ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, ACADEMIC STANDARDS, *ADMISSION CRITERIA, COLLEGE ADMISSION, COLLEGE INTEGRATION, COMPETITIVE SELECTION, ENROLLMENT TRENDS, *HIGHER EDUCATION, *NEGRO STUDENTS, *RACIAL SEGREGATION, VERBAL ABILITY

Enrollment figures indicate that American colleges and universities are still segregated institutions. One-half of Negro college students are attending predominantly Negro colleges and most of the rest are attending junior colleges or other "open door" schools. Although there are a number of reasons for this academic qualifications for admission to selective colleges which are competing keenly for the very small group of Negro high school seniors with acceptable scholastic aptitude test scores. Those institutions which want to integrate must face the fundamental decision of altering traditional standards and practices in order to effectively educate the Negro students they admit. Colleges will need to reevaluate their competitive performance policies and might consider the establishment of separate courses or curriculums of varying difficulty to accomodate a student body with different capabilities. It would also be important for colleges to reexamine the persistent stress on verbal ability as an indicator of scholastic achievement and be willing to accept other kinds of competence as measures of achievement. (NH)

VERBAL ABILITY: An Obsolete Measure!



The academic world

must search

for viable alternatives

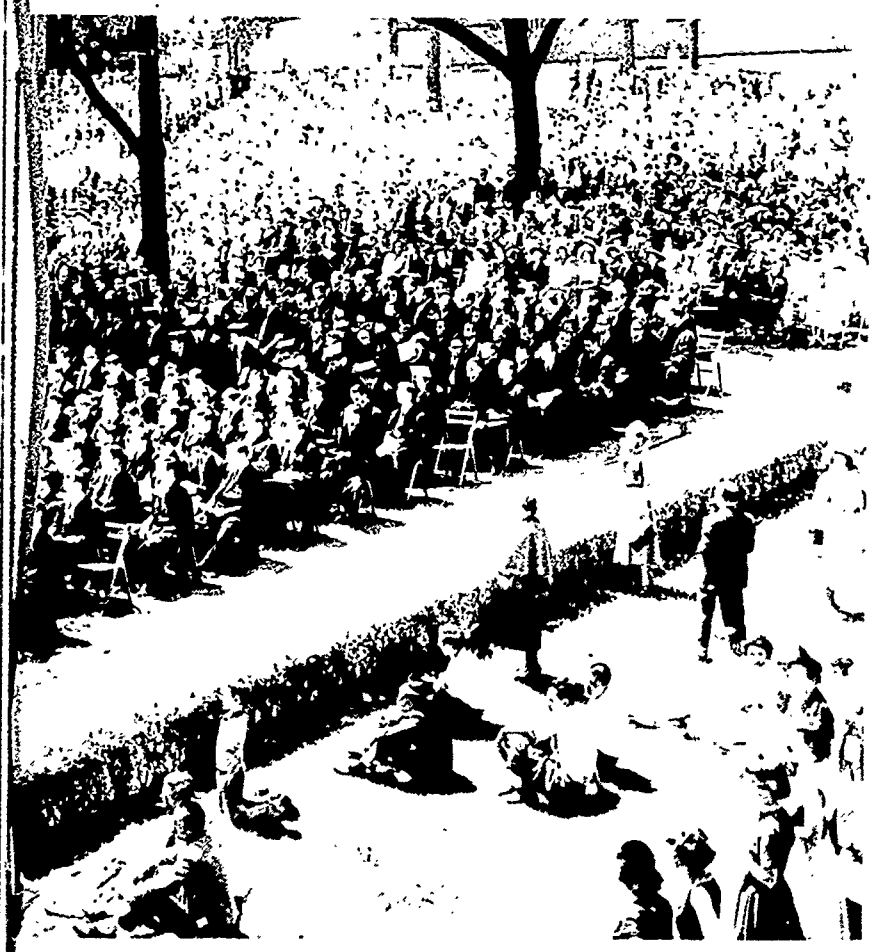
The time has come to discuss the relation of American higher education to the question of racial segregation. Since 1954, college faculties, and increasingly college student bodies, have given frequent and vigorous expression to liberal opinions about the integration of the lower schools. They have done this as members of higher institutions which have been and are now racially segregated within any reasonable meaning of the term.

The academic community at Berkeley, for example, gained national attention for, among other things, its advanced views on the inequitable treatment of the Negro in American society. In 1965, Berkeley had 236 Negroes in a student body of 27,000. The point is not that Berkeley is especially hypocritical, but that the charter of all the leading colleges and universities to comment upon racial integration in education is compromised by their failure to include reasonable numbers of Negroes in their own communities.

The figures are perfectly clear: Half the Negro college students in the country are in predominantly Negro colleges and most of the rest are attending junior colleges or other institutions which will admit anyone who has a high school diploma. In 1965-66, New England colleges, many of them notable as nationally-oriented selective institutions, enrolled about 2,200 Negro students in all, this being 1.07 percent of Negroes who went to college that year. No one knows how many of these few students were children of upper-class Negro families, but no doubt many were. The rest of the Northeastern region was similarly segregated in spite of large Negro populations in major Eastern cities. In the states on the Atlantic seaboard, from the District of Columbia to Maine, "white" institutions enrolled 15,000 to 16,000 Negroes among more than a million white students.

For the country as a whole, 324 collegiate institutions had no Negroes at all and 1,104 had Negroes as 2 percent or less of their total enrollment. A further one hundred or so were predominantly Negro. Of the 400 or so enrolling Negroes as more than 2 percent of their students, most were junior colleges or "open-door" senior institutions.

S. A. Kendrick



Wide World Photo

The survey upon which these figures are based secured responses from only 92 percent of colleges and universities and the figures are based upon local estimates rather than exact counts in most cases.[1] Still, the results seem very clear and the college administrator who doubts these data can usually determine his own situation without much trouble.

Whether one regards this as scandalous or merely regrettable, a number of reasons can be found to account for this *de facto* segregation. Many institutions do not receive applications from Negroes (although this has in the past not been an impediment to successful recruitment in the case of athletes, valedictorians, or other particularly desirable students). Negroes need financial aid to an unusual degree, and this presents difficulties for public and private institutions alike. Mainly, though, the problem is that the population of Negro youth does not present the academic qualifications which will allow them to compete for places in selective colleges.

The shortcomings of the Negro population with respect to academic achievement and ability is well known in a general way. But the extent of the problem is not widely understood. A recent U.S. Office of Education study of twelfth grade students in the nation's public schools used a verbal ability test which can be linked to the Scholastic Aptitude Test of the College Entrance Examination Board. Estimates based upon this study make it appear that, of Negro twelfth graders enrolled in public high schools in 1965-66, only 10 to 15 percent would have scored at 400 or above on the verbal aptitude scale of the College Board's SAT if all had taken that test. Probably, only 1 or 2 percent would have scored at 500 or above. These are figures which many colleges can compare to their own enrolled students. The basic fact is that no more than 15 percent of the Negro twelfth grade students would be expected to score at the level reached by the average enrolled white twelfth grader, including those not going to college.[2]

These figures mean not only that the pool of conventionally qualified Negro high school seniors is small, but that even when selective colleges make large concessions with respect to test scores (and other similar qualifications) competition for this group of moderately able students is very severe. During the past several years, a number of selective colleges have decided to recruit Negro students who would be considered "risks" in comparison with existing student bodies. These efforts have often failed, partly because the group of Negro seniors with SAT scores between 400 and 500 on the College Board Verbal scale (who may be marginal candidates at many selective colleges) are the elite of their own population and cannot be attracted simply by a local collegiate decision to offer them admission and financial aid. Generally speaking, a selective white college must be as attractive to Negro students as it is to white students in order to enroll Negro students who are 100 points below the white student body on the College Board scale. This means it must be able to compete in every way with other colleges of its own kind, with the predominantly Negro colleges, and perhaps most of all with the open-door institutions which may offer low tuition and living costs near the Negro students' homes. Most selective colleges have not been prepared to compete vigorously enough for students who seemed to be marginally qualified—or not "qualified" at all.

Test score comparisons of approximately this kind have been available for many years although not in such readily interpretable form. It is important to realize that although tests are very often inaccurate predictors for individual cases, these estimates are population statistics and are probably quite accurate with respect to the kind of ability measured. The verbal ability scores are given because this is the kind of ability that is universally associated with school grades faculty ratings, and other indices of achievement in educational or training programs. Similar kinds of results exist for tests of mathematical ability, non-verbal ability, and general information in

1. Most of these figures on Negro enrollments are taken from James Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966), principally pp. 370 and 444-445. The data were collected in a U.S. Office of Education survey in 1965.
2. A rather full explanation of these estimates of Negro talent in terms of SAT scores is given in "The Coming Segregation of Our Selective Colleges," by S.A. Kendrick in *College Board Review*. Winter 1968.

large subject areas. It is important to notice that the same kinds of results are also obtained if one looks at the school records of Negro pupils in large "integrated" city school systems where, typically, they do not graduate with high standing and "academic" or "college preparatory" diplomas. It is only when Negro youth are in segregated high schools that they are, perforce, high in class standing in large numbers.

There are many reasons, some of them utterly discreditable to the school systems of our major cities, for the generally low academic accomplishment of Negro youth. As far as verbal tests scores are concerned, it has become conventional to dismiss the scores with the statement that the tests are "culturally biased." The idea of cultural bias is a very important one, but it is not one that gives much comfort in the present case. As developed by a number of scholars over more than thirty years, the concept is important because it contradicts the idea that racial differences on existing tests are *genetically* caused. The idea that the generality of Negroes have not had the same life experiences as have the generality of whites suggests very convincingly that differences between the races on these tests are not due to immutable hereditary conditions. This is a complicated matter and one which is better left to the geneticists than to psychologists, who tend to become excitable and contentious about it.

But after genetic causation is dismissed as not proven or even irrelevant, the hard fact remains that conventional verbal ability tests are closely related to the kinds of tasks which are required of students in colleges and other educational institutions. This is why Kenneth Eels, one of the leading exponents of the idea of cultural bias, has recommended that such tests be called "scholastic aptitude" rather than "intelligence." Whether it is fair or not, the college student must compete with his peers in reading and in manipulating verbal concepts.

Because educational institutions put so much emphasis upon verbal ability in teaching and evaluating students, tests of verbal ability seem to be as effective as admissions instruments in predominantly Negro colleges as in white institutions. It also appears, in the very few institutions where it has been possible to study the matter, that the performance of students in integrated institutions is predicted as accurately for Negroes as for whites, and with the same formulae. None of this evidence can be considered conclusive with respect to test bias at the present time. Still, the existing evidence makes it seem very unlikely that the tests misrepresent Negro students to a very large degree—and a very large misrepresentation would be necessary to account for the very large differences in scores that have been found.

None of this would be particularly disturbing if effective remedial programs were available. Unfortunately, they are not. Whether the problem is put as one of "remedial reading," or of tutoring for the aptitude tests, or in some other remedial frame, there is no known method by which verbal ability can be deliberately improved in reasonably short periods of time. There is some evidence that verbal ability is not changed to any important degree by *differences* in the quality of high schools, even over the entire span of grades nine to twelve.

It is currently fashionable to believe that the critical period for changing verbal ability is the first four or five years of life. However that may be, one of the most important research tasks in education today concerns the ways in which verbal ability can (or cannot) be substantially modified at various ages. As things now stand, we must suspect that colleges, dealing with students in late adolescence, must take verbal ability as it is.

Given these circumstances, colleges which are not satisfied to remain racially segregated must both recruit vigorously and abandon conventional selective admissions in the case of Negro applicants. A few colleges may be rich enough and attractive enough to get substantial numbers of the few able Negro youth. But this is mathematically an impossible general solution. For the foreseeable future, selective colleges will usually be racially segregated and colleges which place high value upon racial integration will have to turn their attention from maintaining standards in the usual sense to doing an effective educational job with the students they take. These will need to be very radical colleges.

The fundamental policy decision presented by the facts outlined above, has been apparent as an ultimate problem since 1954. There was, of course, no impediment to colleges asking themselves these and similar questions before the Supreme Court acted with respect to Negroes in the public schools. But once the Court acted, it was inevitable that the question of integration would be raised at all levels at some not too distant date. The preoccupation of the country with the lower schools and the underdeveloped condition of the Negro population has given the colleges a little time, but that time has passed.

Consider Table 1. In 1960, only about a third of Negro adult males just beyond normal college age were high school graduates. By 1966 more than half were high school graduates and were potential college applicants. For the first time, Negro males have higher educational attainment than Negro females, and historically males have gone to college at higher rates than females in the general population.

Table 1

Educational Attainment of Non-white Persons 25-29 Years Old

	Male	Female
Median Years Completed:		
1960	10.5	11.1
1966	12.1	11.9
% Completing 4 Years of High School:		
1960	36	41
1966	53	49

Source: *Social and Economic Conditions of Negroes in the United States,* (Washington. U.S. Government Printing Office) October 1967.

There is no reason to believe that this rapid increase in the number of Negroes who are theoretically eligible to apply to college will slacken. There is much other evidence that Negroes

Surely ways can be found to reduce the extent of segregation in higher education

are remaining in school beyond the legally required age (usually 16) in huge numbers. It may be that the lack of jobs for school dropouts is becoming obvious to Negro youth, or it may be that the steady propaganda telling youth that the more education they have the better their life chances will be has taken full effect.

Whatever the cause, these students are graduating from high school and will be going to college. The question is quite simply whether substantial numbers of them will be absorbed into the existing body of American higher education or whether the number of predominantly Negro colleges will increase. This is the decision now unavoidably before those existing white institutions that are at all selective in admissions. It is not at all clear that there is any solution to this problem. Certainly, there is not any easy one. But if colleges take thought, and perhaps if they take concerted action, surely ways can be found to reduce the extent of segregation in higher education, if not to eliminate it over some very considerable amount of time.

Colleges may consider, for example, how far they want to go in applying the competitive principle in determining admission. During the years since World War II, selective colleges, including some very famous ones, have been able to increase the average scholastic ability of their students (as measured by tests) so precipitously that large proportions of their alumni would not be eligible for admission today, or would be only marginally so. Although faculties have noticed these changes with understandable approval, it is still true that the bottom of any class is in trouble, no matter how highly selected the class may be. But the idea of "protecting standards" is a mindless platitude if standards are always defined as the standard of the class an institution is able to get at any particular point in time.

The management of absolute rather than competitive performance standards within a single classroom is probably impossible for many teachers. But the maintenance of separate courses or curricula of different difficulty levels is virtually traditional on American college campuses, even if it usually is unplanned. This suggests that without violating ancient customs most colleges could increase the ability of the admissions office to operate on something other than purely competitive standards, by arranging that standards within at least part of the curriculum be based upon requirements other than those established by competition.

A further tradition in many American colleges is that varsity athletes, and sometimes other special groups of students, are provided with tutors, reduced academic loads, and other assistance in recognition of the fact that their value to the institution exceeds the value of having each student compete equally with all others. This basic principle might also be employed with Negro candidates who are not athletes.

Finally, and perhaps most important, it is critical that colleges evaluate the extent to which it is valid to follow the common practice of basing course grades upon measures of verbal ability. It is understandable that courses which are restricted to lectures, textbooks, and final written examinations will tend to rank students at the end of the course pretty much as they were ranked by verbal ability tests at the beginning of the course. A good part of the work offered in many colleges is inescapably and quite properly verbal. But there is good reason to believe that as colleges have accepted responsibility for major programs in occupations and areas of life quite outside the usual concerns of scholarship, the tendency of college professors to do the things they do best—read, write, and talk—has made for ineffective training programs and inappropriate evaluation of students, because of excessive reliance upon verbal ability and failure to reward any other kind of competence.

Groups organized to promote the interests of professions, occupations, or disciplines very understandably work for higher "standards," which invariably turns out to mean higher verbal ability. This has happened in teaching, nursing, social work, and business administration. On one campus or another—at one time or another—it has happened to sociology, history, English, economics, biology, Spanish—in fact, practically every discipline that does not necessarily incorporate the natural barrier of advanced mathematics. Strangely enough, it happens in the secondary schools in shop courses. And in industrial employment verbal ability is often used to screen applicants for jobs that seem to require very little of it. There is no doubt at all that the high verbal is a good fellow to have around.

standards, which can lead to nothing more than a rigid hierarchy of institutions and programs within institutions. This

hierarchy would be (or is) invalid, for ability to teach, administer, innovate, and do numbers of other useful things is apparently not a matter of a large vocabulary.

It is true that only a high verbal can write a good essay about running the mile. Coaches brush this aside as worse than useless, but other teachers do not. Their teaching procedures and grading practices attract the verbally able in the first place, nurture them during instruction, and reward them at the end of it. It is apparent that this is often not appropriate but scarcely anyone has said just where it is or is not.

At least a few institutions are beginning to realize that increasing selectivity in terms of verbal ability is changing the character of the alumni. As ability goes up the proportion of alumni professors increases and the proportion of alumni corporation presidents goes down. This may or may not be a good thing, and it seems at some distance from the question of racial segregation, but the underlying problem is the same: Are there respectable alternatives to verbal ability and the verbal mode in college teaching and grading?

This question of teaching procedures and methods of evaluation reaches the heart of the matter and obviously extends far beyond the important but limited question of racial integration. The nation is moving toward the enrollment in college of a very high proportion of its youth—perhaps not "universal" higher education, but something closer to it than we or any other people have ever had before. This makes it critically important that colleges say what they *are*, which requires, among other things, taking a position on verbal ability.

It would be fatuous to suggest that this question of verbal emphases in teaching and evaluation will be easy to analyze and change. But it is critical that it be taken up. As things now stand, established colleges can continue to increase selectivity along the major academic dimensions and allow the other characteristics of youth to be distributed more or less randomly among institutions. Presumably, youth of lower verbal ability will then be accommodated by junior colleges or new senior institutions of lower status. But actually "other" characteristics of youth will not distribute randomly in that case. Such a system will be quite tightly stratified, socio-economically as well as racially. This kind of stratification is not something that anyone is now planning, but it is beginning to take place. Perhaps it is just as well that the Negro student challenges this developing system in an acutely embarrassing way while there is still time to ask if this is what is wanted.

Challenge: Religion in Academia

A QUIET REVOLUTION

Robert Michaelsen

When the "fire-eating" former Bishop of California, James A. Pike, spoke last year at the University of California in Santa Barbara, every available space was taken, including all the chairs and floor space in overflow rooms where only the bishop's voice could be heard. On this seaside campus, noted for its surfing and relaxed way of life, one might explain this sort of turnout by the fact that the bishop's face had recently graced the cover of *Time* magazine. The bishop had also endeared himself to those who cherish the finer things of life by his good words for marijuana, LSD, and the pill.

But the Pike phenomenon is not an isolated one on our campus. Two years ago as large an audience came out to hear Harvey Cox, and the first speaker ever to attract such a crowd on this relatively new campus was the late Paul Tillich. Furthermore, a year ago on this same campus a symposium on "Theology in Ferment" attracted over three thousand attendants to its four public sessions.

Nor is this sort of thing confined to Southern California. Last year, Professor Hans Kung spoke to thousands at such institutions as Stanford, the University of Michigan, and the University of Hawaii. When he was in the United States four years ago it was reported that this same speaker attracted a larger crowd at Yale than had any previous speaker excepting one—John F. Kennedy. During the last ten years of his life the late Paul Tillich probably spoke to more American students than any other man in academia. This was after he had "retired" from Union Theological Seminary.

Perhaps it does not seem unusual that a bishop or a theologian might bring out large crowds of university students. But those of us whose academic memories go back to the dark ages of the depression can recall when a clerical collar evoked a polite or scornful yawn and theology was regarded as strictly anachronistic. Obviously times have changed.

What is perhaps even more impressive than crowds coming out to hear an occasional visiting bishop or theologian is the evidence of increasing interest in the study of religion and theology—what I have called "a quiet revolution" in American universities. Recently published figures, gathered by Milton McLean of Southern Illinois University, show six state and four private universities with enrollments of over 1,000 in religion courses in 1965-66. Altogether, there were more than 13,000 enrollments in religion courses in nine state universities with a total combined enrollment of about 130,000 students and 10,000 enrollments in religion courses in eleven private schools with a combined enrollment of approximately 60,000. This is a ratio of one to ten in the state schools surveyed,