

# Our Numbers



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# Are Up! (Is That Good?)

by Mark Speyer

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## The Soviet plant manager and the manipulable numbers

My first economics class in the early '60s taught about the resource misallocations characteristic of a Soviet-planned economy. If the manager of a Soviet book production plant were judged by the number of books produced, we learned, inevitably the books would grow shorter and smaller, until there were lots of books, but each with very few pages. If the manager was judged by the number of pages, inevitably there would be fewer and fewer words per page, until there were lots of pages with very little on them. If judged by the number of words, the manager would see that books become wordier and wordier, to the point of un-readability. In short, whatever number was used to evaluate the plant manager would increase dramatically.

### Manipulable college numbers are up: the number of applicants and the SAT average

I think of that plant manager every time another gleeful college representative tells me “our numbers are up.” The numbers in question are not the number of books in the library, the number of tenured professors who teach undergraduates, the number of dollars available for financial aid, the number of students participating in team and club sports, the number participating in charitable activities, or any other number representing a change in substance. The numbers in question are the numbers most subject to the admission office’s manipulation: the total number of applicants to the college and the average SAT scores of the admitted students.

### How colleges increase the size of their applicant pools

The total number of applicants may increase for purely external reasons, such as more students graduating from high school or more students reading good things about a particular college, but the number may also be increasing because admission offices are driving it up by fair means (visiting more high schools) and foul (encouraging students who have no chance of admission to apply, finding new ways to define and count “applicants”).<sup>1</sup>

### How colleges increase their SAT averages

Similarly, SAT scores may be going up because American young people are getting smarter, reading more books, broadening their vocabularies, and grasping the points of arguments faster, but, from where I sit (with 18 years of college counseling experience), it appears SAT scores are going up because college admission makes them a more important factor each year, privileging the applicants with big numbers and playing rough with anyone whose scores are low and because high school students, in response to this trend, are spending more and more hours and more and more dollars trying to drive up their scores.

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### Bigger pools mean shorter reads, more number use, more games

The bigger applicant pool drive and greater SAT emphasis depend on each other. This year, I saw more wait-listing of applicants deemed unlikely to attend; an admission director at one of the most selective colleges in America told me he just didn’t have the staff this year to give applications the time and care they deserved. Bill Fitzsimmons of Harvard, in announcing Harvard’s new policy on early applications, said one reason for the change was worry that they could not continue to give applications the time they deserve if the applicant pool continues to increase in size as it did this year. As colleges generate more applications, without hiring a bigger staff to read them, they rely more on numerical factors like the SAT, with less emphasis on reading and discussing essays or on evaluating a student’s unusual talents. Furthermore, as they worry about how many of these applicants will actually want to enroll, they are tempted to use early decision and early action programs to protect their yield and enticed to play games of every kind, such as wait-listing super-qualified applicants they consider unlikely to attend. Super-sized applicant pools are inexorably producing sillier and shallower admission decisions.



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Jacques Steinberg's recent book on admission at Wesleyan University (CT), *The Gatekeepers*, shows in an early chapter how hard the Wesleyan representative works to generate as many applications as possible, without worrying about whether the applicants have any chance of admission; the later chapter in which he actually reads the applications is entitled "Read Faster, Say No."<sup>2</sup>

**Does it matter?**

Name-brand colleges, some might say, have always been hard to get into; so what if they have become a lot more number-oriented in recent years? When the admission game changes, ambitious students find ways to adapt to the changes and they can always attend a less selective college if the more select colleges don't take them.

**Yes, it matters when it's bad for students and for education**

As a college counselor, a teacher and a parent of teenagers, it does matter. The new obsession with numbers is counter-educational and makes for a less educated and less educable student—a less thoughtful, more cynical, more boring, and more exhausted student—not at all the student colleges want and need. Pumped-up SAT scores do not mean better students. Andrew Delbanco, a professor at Columbia (NY), was a refreshing voice of skepticism and sanity in a *New York Times* op-ed column of March 16, 2001:

“Every year I read that our incoming students have better grades and better SAT scores than in the past. But in the classroom, I do not find a commensurate increase in the number of students who are intellectually curious, adventurous or imbued with fruitful doubt. Many students are chronically stressed, grade-obsessed and, for fear of jeopardizing their ambitions, reluctant to explore subjects in which they doubt their proficiency.”



### **U.S. News and ETS into the leadership gap**

It is commonplace to say the new emphasis on numbers results from the ever-growing power of the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings of colleges. The larger cause of the problem, however, is the lack of a clear definition in this country of what constitutes a good pre-college education. As a nation, the United States, for various historical and political reasons, has been unwilling to adopt the state-developed school curricula and state-administered university entrance examinations France has in its Baccalaureat, Germany in its Abitur, and the United Kingdom in its A-Levels. In America, the definition of what constitutes a good preparation for college is literally a free-for-all: colleges, high schools, journalists, religious leaders, politicians, parents, students—we can all put in our two cents. Still the most influential group today, in defining curricula and standards for America, is our selective colleges and universities—their admission offices, faculties, presidents, and provosts. Unfortunately these people carry their authority lightly and are willing, to a shocking degree, to defer to the rankings developed by *U.S. News* and to the tests developed by ETS. President Richard Atkinson of the University of California demonstrated dramatically the power colleges have over ETS when they choose to exercise it, but leadership like his has been sadly lacking in America, and most of his colleagues seem hopelessly addicted to the numbers-are-up boasting that shows what a splendid job they are doing.

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### **What is to be done? Recognize the problem and take responsibility**

We must take responsibility, individually and collectively, for the problem. A fundamental principle of ethics and of law is that people are responsible for the predictable consequences of their actions. By this principle, every admission rep who increases the importance of the SAT as an admission factor is responsible for the lost time and the lost education of the students who must now spend more time prepping the test. Every counselor, every teacher and every parent who sees the problem and doesn't protest is responsible too. “At work, I lament these developments,” says Andrew Delbanco of Columbia (NY) in his hard-hitting op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, “but at home, I give in to them. I do not forbid my daughter, now a high school junior, from seeking help to raise her test scores.” Every college president or admission rep who believes the *U.S. News* rankings are harmful, but who nonetheless advertises the high position his or her institution has won in those rankings, is responsible for their ever-growing power. Some in small ways, some in large, as individuals, as members of organizations, as employees of institutions, we are all responsible.



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#### **Colleges must recognize that they define educational standards**

As a specific application of the point about taking responsibility, colleges and universities should recognize the central role they play in defining curricula and standards for secondary education in America and should work to develop and promulgate intelligent standards. The power our federal and state governments exercise over the education of our best young people is mild compared to the power Harvard, Yale and Stanford exercise. Needless to say, our elected representative bodies have the power to define educational standards if we want them to, but so far we don't want them to and so the name-brand colleges must recognize that they are running the show and running the lives of their and other peoples' children.

#### **Separate the College Board from the SAT**

We who work in college admission need to empower our professional organizations to address the problem. In its origin, and in theory even today, the College Board is an association of secondary schools and colleges meeting to define the procedures and standards for college admission. In its most important aspect today, however, the College Board owns the SAT and works to defend it and to maximize its revenue. The College Board cannot be true to its purpose as long as it owns the SAT and, for its soul's sake, it should give, sell or barter the SAT to the Educational Testing Service, sever all legal and geographical connections, then sit down and have a real, unbiased discussion about what kinds of tests and what kinds of admission procedures will produce the best college students for our nation.

#### **Empower NACAC**

Similarly, we need to build NACAC into an organization that sets standards and enforces them. Yale's president and admission office deserve credit for their leadership in criticizing and curbing the growth of early decision programs, but they deserve blame for threatening to operate outside NACAC guidelines for early programs. As President Kennedy said about the UN, NACAC is our "last, best hope."

Early programs are Catch-22s. Individual admission deans and directors, like Fitzsimmons of Harvard, publicly say they would love to end such programs, but not until their competitors end them too, yet if all the competitors get together and end them collectively, they fear the federal government would accuse them of collusion. So they can't act individually or collectively. Only an organization like NACAC can bring us out of this mess and we must support NACAC as much as we can.

### Develop professional rankings

We should redeem the rankings. If colleges and universities are unhappy with the job that *U.S. News* is doing, they should set about devising and publishing their own rankings. If you want something done right, do it yourself. No doubt college-based rankings would be complicated and controversial, but peer review is still a central principle of scholarship in American colleges. Every discipline uses methods and standards to evaluate new knowledge and we do not believe all assertions and opinions are equally worthwhile. Evaluation is a central responsibility of all educational institutions. There is no reason colleges cannot learn to evaluate each other in the same way they evaluate students. Perhaps NACAC or an SAT-independent College Board should develop the rankings. In any case, the consumers of our ridiculously expensive higher education system clearly want rankings and, until an appropriate professional body provides them, the power of the *U.S. News* rankings only increases.

### Confront the SAT

We should redeem—or replace—the SAT. Whenever I complain to college people about the ridiculous emphasis placed on the SAT, they tell me of their sincere belief that “there is a role for the SAT in admission decisions.” Perhaps there is, but not the role it has taken on lately, as the most important single element in selective admission, the most important thing for teenagers to work on if they want to go to a super-competitive college. A very simple and sensible first step, which of course a few colleges have already taken, is to accept SAT IIs in place of SAT Is—three SAT IIs for colleges requiring only the SAT I, five or more SAT IIs for colleges that have asked for the SAT I and three SAT IIs. This way, all these young people trooping off to their tutors and their prep courses would at least be learning about American history or Latin verbs or chemical valences—things worth knowing about in college and in life.

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**To solve your problem, first recognize it**

We have a problem on our hands. In spite of the increased numbers, things are not better than ever. We are torturing our young people and sending them less prepared to college than students were 10 years ago. College and high school employees, test-makers and teachers, college reps and high school counselors, parents and students—all of us can do a much better job.

**References**

1. See Rachel Toor, *Admissions Confidential: An Insider's Account of the Elite College Selection Process* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001), page 27, on admission at Duke: “The reason we do recruiting is to get the BWRKs [bright well-rounded kids] to apply so that we can deny them and bolster our selectivity rating. We do not say this.”

2. See Jacques Steinberg, *The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002), page 5: “You realize that, further down the line, a lot of these kids will end up applying and being denied,” Ralph [the representative] said later. “But you can't really think about that at this stage.” “Read Faster, Say No” is the title of Chapter 5 and the mantra of the Wesleyan representative's wife, trying to help keep him from falling behind in his reading.