The SAT Showdown

What's really behind California's proposal to stop requiring the test? Growing pressure from minority populations for slots at the best schools in an age when affirmative action is out of fashion.

BY BARBARA KANTROWITZ AND DONNA FOOTE

WHEN HE WAS DIRECTOR OF the National Science Foundation, Richard Atkinson had a mountain in Antarctica named after him. Now that he's president of the University of California, high-school students in the state might want to rechristen the capital—or at least dedicate their yearbooks to him. Atkinson has taken on a dreaded rite of passage, the SATs, and proposed that the nation's largest and most prestigious public-university system no longer require the aptitude portion of the tests, called the SAT I. Instead, he wants UC to adopt a more "holistic" approach, which would consider activities and grades, as well as scores on the SAT IIs, tests that measure mastery of particular subjects.

Atkinson's proposal is a hot topic because more students than ever before, from grade school on up, are hunched over answer sheets clutching their freshly sharpened No. 2 pencils. Standardized testing, which just a few years ago meant the SATs and not much else, is the newest "silver bullet" to fix public schools. Tests are popular because they can be used to enforce standards of what kids should learn. Annual testing in grades 3 to 8 is central to President George W. Bush's education-reform plan. Not all educators think this is a good thing, however, and some colleges have already stopped requiring the SAT I. Even the best test, they say, can miss subtleties of an individual student's strengths. Wealthy students generally get much better scores, and results vary greatly by ethnic background. Critics of the test say Atkinson's proposal could have a huge impact. California, says Nicholas Lemann, author of "The Big Test," a history of the SATs, "is the single biggest client of the test, the biggest school system and the biggest state-university system. It's not just another client. California influences other universities."

But the nation's high-school seniors aren't off the hook yet. Atkinson's proposal, made in a speech before the American Council on Education, may have less to do with flaws in the SATs and more to do with the unique problems of UC, a public-university system with such a huge number of applicants that admissions officials need some kind of objective criteria. California, like Texas and Florida, has to balance the needs of different ethnic constituencies: whites, Asians, blacks and especially the growing number of Hispanics who want access to the best state schools. This becomes even more complicated without affirmative action.

In 1995 the state's Board of Regents prohibited racial preferences in admissions; the following year the state's voters passed Proposition 209, which outlawed affirmative action in all public universities and government agencies. In the wake of 209, enrollment of black and Hispanic students plummeted at UC's top campuses—Berkeley, L.A. and San Diego. Overall, however, the system has fared better than many critics of 209 predicted. This year UC minority enrollment is just 1 percent below the 1995 level, as black and Hispanic

students have gained places at less competitive campuses like Irvine and Santa Cruz.

That's partly because the state has spent millions in an outreach program and expanded financial aid. This year California is also implementing a plan based on grades alone that guarantees admission to the top 4 percent of students in every high school in the state. Ward Connerly, the outspoken black member of the Board of Regents who fathered 209, says Atkinson has been under continuous pressure to admit more minorities, especially Hispanics. "There isn't a day that goes by that he doesn't have to deal with that pressure," Connerly says. In fact, he adds, getting rid of the SAT I was about the only plan Atkinson had not already proposed to "get more people in."

In his speech, Atkinson argued that dropping the SAT I would help all students, not just minority applicants. An academic for more than 40 years—his field of study is cognitive psychology—Atkinson says he began questioning the use of the SATs about a year ago, when he found his 12-year-old granddaughter working away at a pile of primers for the verbal-analogy portion of the test that she won't take for years. Atkinson then visited a private junior high school and found the same kind of prepping. He ordered his staff to buy armloads of SAT workbooks and then spent a weekend poring over them. He took sample tests, quizzed himself on verbal analogies and plowed through math problems. Then, on Monday morning, at the weekly president's cabinet meeting on the 12th floor of UC headquarters in downtown Oakland, he exploded over what he saw as an overemphasis on teaching to the test. Pounding his fist on the huge conference table, he said, "Something must be done."

For months Atkinson studied the issue, consulting with experts, faculty and colleagues. At a December meeting of UC admissions officers, the proposal was one of several floated as a means of creating greater flexibility in admissions. Last week he formalized the idea in a letter to the Academic Council. The plan has to be approved by the council and the regents; the earliest it could be in place would be 2003.

No matter what happens in California, though, SATs aren't going away soon. Many of the nation's 2,151 four-year institutions require standardized aptitude tests. Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, which oversees the SATs, says the tests are "a common yardstick in an era of grade inflation." At Harvard, arguably the nation's most selective school, William Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions and financial aid, says the SAT I will remain a requirement. "We want students to have as many chances as possible to demonstrate

whatever it is they've done well." Even some students say the tests are necessary. In a column for The Cavalier Daily, the University of Virginia's student newspaper, junior Elizabeth Managan said SAT scores were especially important for institutions that draw students from a wide range of schools and "need some way to control for disparities in courses, state standards and grades."

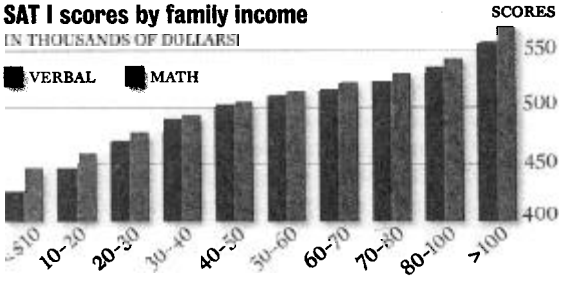
In the meantime, the members of California's high-school class of 2003, the first who would be affected by Atkinson's proposal, are waiting anxiously to see what happens. Christine Bridgman, a sophomore at Mira Costa High School in Manhattan Beach, Calif., started SAT prepping in eighth grade when she got up at 7 a.m. to take Latin classes to improve her vocabulary. This year she transferred into an advanced English course with a teacher who preps for the SAT. Next year she plans to take a weekend prep course. "Kids are freaked out over this test," she says. "A lot of them will be happy to see it go." The call to put down those pencils can't come too soon.

With JULIE SCELFO

Picking Kids by the Numbers

Performance on the SAT I varies widely by income level and race. A few sample questions hint why.

SAT I scores by family income



SAT I scores by ethnic group

	SAT I MEAN SCORE VERBAL Male/Female		SAT I MEAN SCORE MATH Male/Female	
Asian, Asian-American or Pacific Islander	501	498	583	548
African-American or Black				
Mexican or Mexican-American	458	449	480	445
Latin, South, Central American or Other Hispanic	457	427	489	451
White	529	526	549	514

Sample SAT I questions

Verbal

CRASS: REFINEMENT

(A) inefficient : time
(B) prudent : discretion
(C) clairvoyant : perception
(D) inept : mistake
(E) pretentious : modesty

Math

How many three-digit numbers have the hundreds digit equal to 3 and the units digit equal to 4?

(A) 10 (B) 19 (C) 20
(D) 190 (E) 200

ANSWERS: VERBAL: (B) MATH: (A)

SOURCES: THE COLLEGE BOARD RESEARCH LIBRARY, EDUCATIONAL TESTING SERVICE

painful
truth is at stake? For the relatives