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Univ. Educ.; Bakke

## Who Gets Ahead?

# Biggest Testing Service Faces Critical Scrutiny As Its Influence Grows

Exams for College and Jobs Written by ETS Called Superficial, Often Unfair

Bakke and Blacks Complain

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PRINCETON, N.J.—If you have ever tried to get into college, or to become a lawyer, automobile mechanic, podiatrist, or stockbroker, chances are that you are familiar with Educational Testing Service.

And it is likely that you may not be overly fond of ETS, concedes Robert Solomon, executive vice president, who says, "Nobody likes taking tests." Examinations devised by ETS help control entry into colleges, graduate schools and more than 50 professions.

"We're viewed as the nation's gate-maker," says William Turnbull, ETS president.

The headquarters of this \$70 million-a-year nonprofit enterprise, located on 400 rolling acres just south of the prosperous university community of Princeton, looks more like a college campus than a business. But ETS is a hard-nosed business organization, and a controversial one at that.

### How Important?

Indeed, ETS and the other testing services are enmeshed in a furor about standardized testing that also involves the courts, the academic community and Congress. The Supreme Court, in the Bakke case, is considering, among other questions, how much weight universities should place on test scores in selecting applicants for admission.

Across the country, parents and educators are worrying about the widely noted decline in scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, ETS's flagship exam. Some professional groups, such as the National Education Association, have called for a moratorium on standardized testing, and a Harvard Medical School professor even has advocated boycotting the S.A.T. In Congress, Rep. Michael Harrington, Democrat of Massachusetts, has introduced a bill designed, he says, "to open the secrets of standardized testing to full public review."

At the same time, society is being pushed toward greater reliance on testing, by increasing competition for a limited number of places in graduate and professional schools, and by the quantities of student applicants with uniformly high grade-point averages. Professional certification and licensing boards are using more tests to be sure they comply with government antidiscrimination regulations.

All of this follows long-unresolved questions about testing. Since the 1960s, black groups have charged that the exams are "culturally biased" against certain ethnic minorities. There are other complaints; as early as 1962, mathematician Banesh Hoffman, in the book "Tyranny of Testing," contended that multiple-choice exams like those written by ETS testers "reward superficiality, ignore creativity, and penalize the person with a subtle, probing mind."

### Guarding the Portals

As the biggest testing service, ETS is directly in the line of fire. "ETS is standing at the door at all the crucial points in a person's life," asserts Alan Nairn, a Princeton University undergraduate who is co-directing a study of ETS sponsored by Ralph Nader. Peter Liacouras, dean of Temple University's law school, says the company is becoming a "cradle to grave arbiter of social mobility in America."

ETS has grown steadily. In the 1951-52 academic year, only 81,000 S.A.T. exams were given; that figure rose tenfold to 802,000 by 1961-62, and peaked at 1.6 million in 1969-70 (the 1976-77 figure was 1.4 million). The number taking graduate-school admissions tests also has risen rapidly.

ETS thus has grown from a company with capital of \$1.4 million in 1947 to one that now has capital of \$25.4 million, and averages a surplus of about \$1 million a year. (The profits are directed to internal development.)

### Seeking Research Grants

The postwar baby boom and the increased emphasis on higher education during the 1960s contributed to the company's growth, of course. But ETS also has aggressively sought government and foundation grants to do educational research (these sources now account for 10% of revenues), and it has created the Center for Occupational and Professional Assessment (COPA).

By devising licensing and certification exams for more than 50 vocations, COPA in effect has extended ETS markets by following students out of the universities and into the professions. The list includes social workers, insurance actuaries, gynecologists, urban planners, Philadelphia firemen and U.S. Foreign Service Officers (ETS also administers the entrance exam for the Central Intelligence Agency, grading tests made up of questions supplied by the CIA).

ETS isn't alone in the field. American College Testing Program of Iowa City, another nonprofit company, had 1976 revenues of \$18.2 million (compared to ETS's \$70 million for the fiscal year ended last June 30), and profits of \$2.4 million.

ACT administers an exam similar to the S.A.T., but it is currently notable for being the writer and administrator of the Medical College Admissions Test, which figures in the potentially landmark Bakke case. Allan Bakke, a white, charges that the University of California at Davis violated his civil rights in bypassing him for medical-school admission in favor of minority candidates with lower grades and test scores.

ETS also is keeping close watch on the

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# Who Gets Ahead?: Testing Service Faces Criticism as Influence Grows

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Bakke case, since college and university-related tests continue to provide the bulk of its revenues. ETS staffers have written a report for the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education that endorses the use of special admissions standards for minorities in order to increase their numbers in colleges and universities.

The Bakke case once again raises the troublesome issue for ETS of whether its standardized tests are "culturally biased." While the company doesn't give racial breakdowns of its scores, educators say that whites, on average, score more than 100 points higher on the S.A.T. and similar tests than do blacks and other minorities. (The possible scores range from 200 to 800.) To the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, that is evidence that the tests are "inherently racist."

Not so, replies ETS. Mr. Turnbull, the company's president, blames the discrepancy in scores on educational disadvantages of minority students. The test results merely reflect those disadvantages, he says. Moreover, he cites ETS studies indicating that the S.A.T. predicts college performance as accurately for blacks as it does for whites. (Since the mid-1960s ETS has made sure to include passages by black authors in the reading comprehension parts of its admissions tests.)

Other critics of the testing company question its close relationships with the organizations that sponsor the exams, including the College Entrance Examination Board, the Law School Admissions Council and the Graduate Management Admissions Council. "The outside agencies serve as rubber stamps for ETS," charges Mr. Nairn, the Nader researcher. As a result, he says,

ETS isn't accountable to the sponsoring organizations "or to the students who must take and pay for the exams."

ETS strongly disputes that assertion. "The relationships are by contract with independent organizations," says Mr. Solomon, the executive vice president. While he acknowledges that neither the law school nor the management school bodies have their own offices or staffs, he says they often act independently. In fact, the Law School Admissions Council almost shifted its contract to American College Testing Program in 1973.

## Cozy With Academia

Much of ETS's success can be traced to its close relationships with the academic community. In part, this reflects ETS's roots; it is the offspring of three organizations: the College Entrance Examination Board, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the American Council on Education.

At the turn of the century, the College Board designed a standard entrance exam for several Eastern colleges and universities. In 1926, the Board began experimenting with the S.A.T., which had been devised by Carl C. Brigham, a Princeton University psychologist. The test came into general use after World War II, when applicants flooded colleges around the country.

About that time, the late James Conant, then president of Harvard University, began pressing for creation of a new organization that would take over the functions of the Board, the Carnegie Foundation and the American Council. ETS was born in 1947, and still, says a spokesman, draws its talent "primarily from the academic community." President Turnbull, for instance, is a psychologist by training.

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ETS nurtures its academic relationships by holding conferences and other gatherings at its posh new \$3 million hotel and conference center on the headquarters "campus," as ETS officials call it.

The coziness with academia irritates ETS's rivals in private industry, of whom the largest is Psychological Corp., a unit of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. Psychological Corp. had 1976 revenues of about \$22 million. Roger Lennon, senior vice president of the parent company, complains that ETS's nonprofit status gives it "an unfair advantage at times," and says that its academic image is another advantage.

"Academic types tend to feel more at home dealing with something that isn't perceived as a commercial enterprise," says Mr. Lennon.

College Board programs account for more than 42% of ETS revenues, and College Board president Sidney Marland is a trustee of ETS, while ETS's Mr. Turnbull is a trustee of the College Board. But Mr. Marland says the two organizations "are careful to sustain ourselves at arms' length, friendly though we are."

Some dispute the contention that ETS has too much say about who gets ahead in America. "ETS is powerful only to the extent that colleges and graduate schools allow it to be," says Evalyn Hornig, director of graduate school and pre-professional advising at Dartmouth College.

## Weeding Out Applicants

Law schools, according to Mrs. Hornig and others, particularly rely on the tests to weed out about half of the 80,000 or so annual applicants for the 40,000 first-year places in law school—even though many, such as Mr. Liacouras of Temple University's law school, dispute the tests' value.

"Common sense, motivation, judgment, idealism, client handling ability, oral skills and leadership" are among the qualities not measured by the Law School Aptitude Test, according to Mr. Liacouras. For this reason, Temple selects 25% of its entering law school classes through a "discretionary admissions process" that emphasizes those traits while playing down test scores.

The L.S.A.T., says Dean Liacouras, offers "a convenient and easy shorthand" for most admissions officers.

The Graduate Record exams produced by

ETS for applicants to graduate schools also come under fire. Stuart Curran, chairman of the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania, says the Record exam in English literature "doesn't give you any sense of the quality of a person's mind."

"A drudge can do as well as a genius," contends Mr. Curran. However, he acknowledges that the university partially relies on the test because it "shows the breadth of knowledge an applicant has."

Be it auto mechanic, real-estate agent, or scholar in English, the person taking an ETS exam is likely to find his skills or knowledge being measured by multiple choice questions. The exam for firefighters, for instance, might have a drawing of a burning house, along with factual information (the time of day, weather and wind situation) and then offer the applicant a choice of methods for entering the house to make a rescue.

The S.A.T. is written and updated by a staff of 58 test developers. All new questions must be pre-tested, that is, included on an actual exam but not counted for scoring purposes. Pre-testing establishes whether a question is "easy" (more than 70% get it right) or "hard" (fewer than 30% get it right). If more than 90% get a question right or wrong, it is discarded from the test.