

*Can we change the Test that changes Lives?*

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It has been almost three years since I last took the SAT, but I will never forget the difficult time in my international high school in Norway, when I had to discipline myself to memorize twenty vocabularies, revise old vocabularies, and finish a four-hour long practice test every day on top of college applications, high school homework, and IB practice exams. My Asian, African and Latino friends and I just assumed that we were not as good as our white peers in standardized testing, so we had to work extra hard to get into good colleges in the United States. To us, international and American students who want higher education in the U.S., the SAT was paramount. Even though we spent many sleepless nights and potential homework time in preparation for the test, it would all be worth it if it got us into some good colleges. Sadly, a few of my friends were intimidated by the whole college admission process, especially taking the SAT, so they decided to return to their home countries for college or employment. That was the norm in my high school: jump through the fire (the SAT) to college or walk other paths. I believe it is also similar for many high school students, especially those with low socio-economic status. My friends and I were in no position to question using this high-stakes college entrance admissions exam, its effects on the equity of college access, or its influence on “real learning,” but educators should take up this question.

### **When Meritocratic Efficiency meet with Score gaps**

Back in the late 1800s, elite colleges hope to find a measurement that could sort through high school students according to their intelligence and core ability and place students effectively and efficiently in colleges or work places most suitable for them. With the support of many elite colleges, Carl C. Brigham, one of the psychologists who worked on the Army Alpha and Beta test, designed the SAT based on this idea. Steele (2004) called this idea the “ability paradigm.” The rationale behind the “ability paradigm” is that achieving meritocratic efficiency would maximize the return on society’s investment in education by allocating most resources to those, who derived the most benefit most from those resources as indicated by test scores. The paradigm assumes that there is core intellectual ability, which is fairly stable across a person’s life span, and can be measured accurately by cognitive ability tests for people from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The assumptions upon which the SAT rests are faulty. Science has never been able to show that core intellectual ability exists; people also change their intellectual capacities across their life span for better or worse. Besides, the test has not been a valid and reliable measure of ability or aptitude for all test takers as demonstrated by the score gap. As reported in Nicholas Lemann’s *The Big Test*, James Coleman (the promulgator of the SAT) has long noticed the black-white score gap. Acknowledging the gap, colleges and universities still choose to heavily rely on SAT to select applicants today. According to the *Total Group Report: College-Bound Seniors 2008*, the average total scores of white students outscored those of Black/ African American students by 311 points (20%), Hispanic /Latino/ Latin American students by 226 points (14%) and Mexican/Mexican American students by 227 points (14%). Looking at student background information and characteristics, test scores also increase with family income and the highest level of parental education attained.

## Reasons for Scores Gap

There are two ways to interpret the score gaps: (1) the SAT is culturally and socio-economic biased and therefore not a good measure of ability; (2) the SAT is fair, so students are inherently less able if they have a poor family, less educated parents, and minority culture. While interpretation (1) is controversial and still being debated in the literature, interpretation (2) is essentially classist and racist, so the paper will not be focusing on the latter. As for interpretation (1), the rich debate in the SAT validity literature provides three reasons for the score gaps: income, race, and identity. These reasons would be logical considering that the SAT was mainly designed for white male applicants from middle to upper class backgrounds.

Income inequality causes disparity among students regarding access to admissions testing information and preparation, and hence the score gap between rich and poor test takers. I still remember first learning about the test format and content from *How to crack the SAT?* (whose cover usually shows darker-skinned students doing practice test thoughtfully). It is like learning a new way to walk. The more you practice, the better you get. There is a verbal list which contains several hundred vocabulary words most used in the test. Mine must not have been good enough, because among all those I memorized, only a handful appeared in the real test, and since I did not know many other key words in the question, it did not help much. Richer parents can send their kids to test-prep courses. For low income students who waive out of the \$45 SAT fee, families are unlikely to send them to expensive test-prep courses (the cheapest at \$400 per 10 class-session<sup>1</sup>). The exact increase in scores as a result of test preparation is hard to determine. Test preparation companies often claim that the increase will be as much as 100 points. Reliable academic research suggests that the increase will be between 20 to 30 points. Another way to increase test scores is to take the PSAT, 82% of the test taker in 2008 had taken the PSAT. Those took the PSAT multiple times achieved significantly higher scores than those who never took it and those who took it one time. Some students even choose to take the SAT multiple times in an attempt to receive higher scores.

In addition to income, race also makes a difference. Today, Black/ African Americans and Hispanic/ Latino/ Latin Americans are among the poorest races in America. In addition to the income bias mentioned in the previous paragraph, these two groups of students are also subject to cultural bias in test content, teachers' expectations and stereotype threat. Rosner found that every single one of the 138 questions on the October 1998 SAT favored whites over blacks. He calls those "white preference questions," which are answered correctly by a higher percentage of white than black students. He suggests that "white preference questions" are the result of the "scientific" test construction methods which keep a question if a high percentage of high-score test-taker – usually white students answer it correctly. Here's a verbal question example he gave that illustrates the SAT's skewed test construction process:

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<sup>1</sup> Information from ETC Preparatory Academy Educational tutoring & Consulting in Washington

The actor's bearing on stage seemed \_\_\_\_\_: her movements were natural and her technique \_\_\_\_\_.

- (A) unremitting ... blasé
- (B) fluid ... tentative
- (C) unstudied ... uncontrived
- (D) eclectic ... uniform
- (E) grandiose ... controlled

The correct answer is (C). According to ETS, 8% more African-Americans answered this question correctly than white students. Rosner called it a "black preference question". Since this question did not favor high-score test-takers in the prep-test, ETS rejected it for the use on the SAT. I cannot explain why Black students performed better on this item, it could be cultural to their way of speech or thinking; however, the process of eliminating questions, which low-score test-takers performed better must be capturing something cultural to these students. Rosner further hypothesized that every question chosen in the SAT has favored Whites over Black in the past 10 years. On the October 1998 SAT, "one-fifth [of the questions] showed huge 20% gaps favoring whites".

Empirically, scholars generally agree that the SAT is a valid predictor for college success in terms of freshman GPA (Bridgeman, McCamley-Jenkins, & Ervin, 2000; Weitzman, 1982), cumulative GPA (Fleming & Garcia, 1998; Fincher, 1974) and graduation rate (Robinson & Morgan, 1989) for white applicants. Based on recent studies, the validity of the SAT seems to be inconsistent in predicting college success for minority students, which suggests that the SAT should not be used in the same way in college admission for all applicants (Crouse & Trusheim, 1988; Micceri 2007; Moffatt 1993). There is an overwhelming amount of evidence pointing at the bias of the SAT against low income students, Black/ African American and Hispanic/ Latino students.

Black and Latino students score lower because their cultural identification, since teachers have a lower expectation on them. "Although they comprise a relatively small portion of the American population (less than 6%), Black males occupy a large space with the American psyche and imagination. (Noguera, 2008 pp. xi)" They are often portrayed by the media as "others," who are "fierce" and "masculine". They are seen as a threat in the classroom and often receive harsher punishment than their white peers for the same wrong deeds. Hispanic students are also seems as trouble makers and are overly represented in the special education classroom. Noguera (2008) and Tatum (1997) suggest that these stereotypes threats influence Black adolescent students to relate doing well in school with acting white – the "acting White hypothesis"; therefore, they often develop an "oppositional identity" and avoid doing well in standardized testing for fear of losing support from their peers. Nevertheless, this behavior disappears in college. Steele and Aronson's research (1995) reveals another identity-linked contextual pressure that especially affects the academic vanguard of African-American students. Some high-achieving students may try to prove the negative stereotype wrong, which in turn creates more stress, distraction, narrowed attention, anxiety, self-consciousness, withdrawal of effort, over-effort, etc.

## **Rethinking College Access**

Something is not right when college admissions place a heavy emphasis on the SAT. Admission officers must question the meaning of the score gaps and test scores for several reasons: (1) the low predictive ability of the SAT and (2) SAT's influence on equity in college access.

The SAT's predictive ability varies greatly in predicting college success depending on the specifications of different research. Most studies measure the predictive ability of the SAT for freshman GPA. Steele and Rosner found that the SAT correlated 1:0.42 with freshman grades and correlates considerably less well with subsequent grades and life outcomes. For their studies, the SAT only explains 18% of the characteristics that determine freshman grades. Studies usually pick freshman grades because 4 year cumulative GPA usually differs a lot from freshman GPA. The SAT claims that it can predict college success based on the assumption that core intelligence stays fairly stable across time. In reality, students change their major, or come across different opportunities, and their cognitive ability grows over time at a different rate. It is naïve to think that the SAT can sort students' potential. In my Economic honor thesis, I regressed cumulative GPA with total SAT scores, gender, number of concentration with class and country dummy; I found that the coefficient for the SAT is 0.32, which means that a 10% increase in SAT scores would translate into a 3% increase in cumulative GPA. A large point difference in the SAT does not tell college admissions much about a student's potential. 100 to 200 points difference in SAT scores may mean 0.03 point different in GPA. On the other hand, there is a selection process involved when students choose colleges to which to apply. It takes time and effort to apply to different colleges. The students understand that attempting for too challenging colleges may only be a waste of time, since the colleges will unlikely to accept them. On the other hand, applying to a too easy one is also a waste of time, since they may not end up going there. In addition, it is impossible to use a single set of SAT scores of a student to predict GPA in colleges with different selectivity. A 4.0 predicted GPA in Harvard means differently in less selective colleges. Therefore, the SAT scores may not be a useful tool for all colleges.

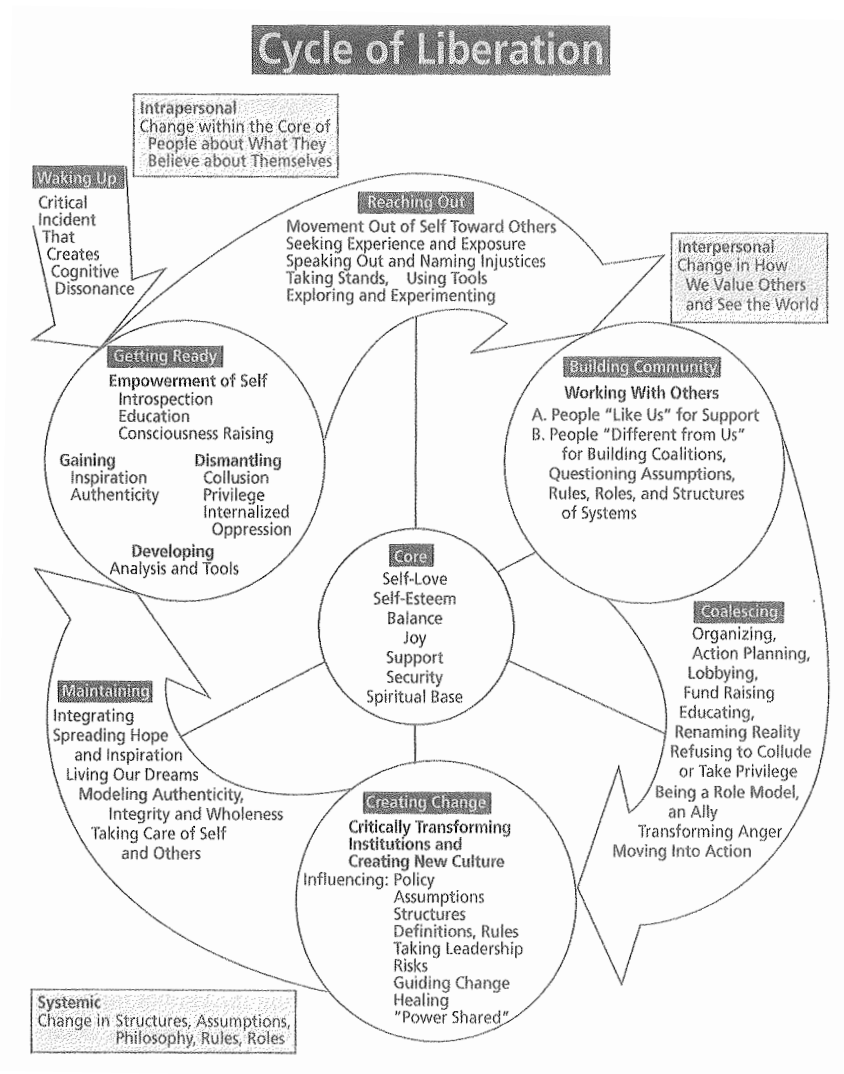
Besides, predicting freshman grades is not the ultimate goal of college admissions. Colleges should only require the SAT if the test scores tell important information that high school records (which are better indicators of college success) have not already told. Schmidt (2008) criticizes elite colleges' giving excessive weight to SAT scores to bolster their college-guide rankings at the cost of their pursuit of diversity. Since White students constantly score higher than minorities, heavy emphasis on the SAT will lead admissions officers to reject low-scoring applicants, who are mostly low income Black and Hispanic students. This process will increase the cultural and socioeconomic inequity in college access.

Society as a whole needs to rethink about the requirement of the SAT in college admissions. What is the goal of college admissions? Whether the answer is equity in college access, students' growth, GPA or bolstering college-guide rankings, admissions offices should use the SAT cautiously. It is important to bear in mind not only the faulty assumptions behind the SAT, but that the SAT is also potentially biased against low

income and minority students. Requiring the SAT in college admissions can contribute to the racial and income inequity of college access. It is time to rethink college admission criteria.

## Reform Initiative - The R.E.C.

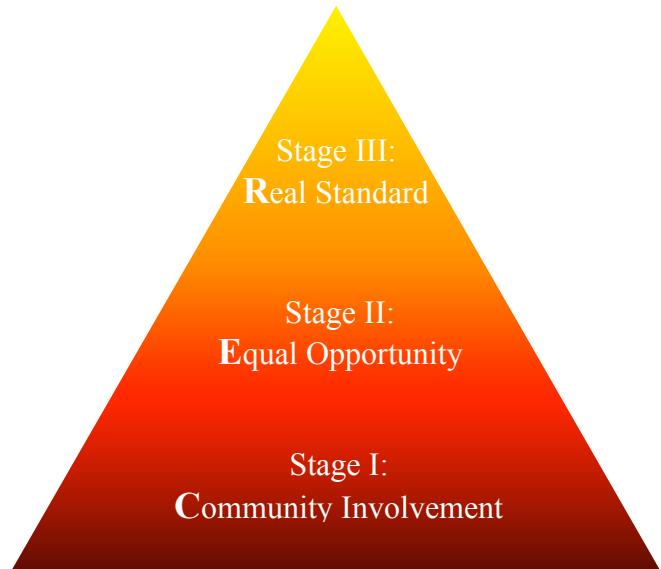
This Initiative borrows its main ideas from the Cycle of Liberation model (Bobbie Harro 2000), which describes a cyclical process that seems to occur in most successful social change efforts. The Cycle of Liberation model is a transformation of the Cycle of Socialization. It has 7 stages with core values that draw the stages together. The cycle should be seen as a map of “changing terrain, where not everyone goes to the same direction or destination or at the same speed”.



The creation of this initiative is at the “Waking up” phrase of the model. Amid of the growing concern regarding high-stakes standardized admissions exams, many educators are “waking up” from the century-old system. Cognitive dissonance emerges. The Issue Assessment has summarized some of the concerns, namely equity in college assessment and the reliability & validity of the SAT. Each stage of the Initiative will parallel different phrase(s) of the Cycle of Liberation.

In short, the three-stage Reform Initiative is called R.E.C., as shown in the diagram on the right. It calls for partnership between K-12, higher education, libraries, local communities and legislative bodies to discuss the issue of high-stakes college entrance standardized testing, and to take responsibility in ensuring equal education and in deciding a “real standard” for college admission. R.E.C. also allows students, teachers and parents most affected by college entrance tests to communicate their experience and concerns with the broader society – the Department of Education, testing companies, and other business entities, universities and colleges. Due to the scale of collaboration, this reform would be

best funded by the Federal government and enhanced through State regulation.



### **The R.E.C. Board**

First of all, this systemic reform requires a Board to plan, implement, constantly evaluate and improve R.E.C. To ensure voices are heard from all part of the community, the Board should represent different members of the community, for example, school board, teachers, parents, social workers, librarians, college admission officers, business consortiums, churches, congress, etc. The Board should meet at least once a month to evaluate the process of R.E.C. and its readiness to move on to the next stage. The Board member should also serve as public relation personnel for R.E.C in their own smaller communities.

### ***Stage I: Community Involvement***

This is a crucial step toward a community-based/supported policy. Being the base of the R.E.C. Triangle, Stage I parallels to the “Getting Ready”, “Reaching Out” and “Building community” phase of the Cycle of Liberation. Stage I involves community engagement to consciously and constantly dismantle some of our wrong or diminishing beliefs regarding the SAT (caused by stereotypes, ignorance or misinformation) and our discriminatory or privileged attitudes. This initiative realizes the need of public opinion in order to design programs and policies that are best for most; therefore, Stage I gets the

public ready to empower themselves, tries to stir up public awareness and debate of the issue regarding college admission, and collect policy ideas for later stages of R.E.C.

*Discussions* will be organized with different methods in various settings. There will be discussions with both traditional (panel discussion) and creative methods (discussion around video, music, comics or photos). Depending on the district and context of the venue, some of the discussion sections would be in minority language like Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, Somalian, etc. Possible venues include schools, community libraries, churches, the Department of Education, youth center, and community centers to cover most of the community groups and to provide them with non-threatening environments in which to express their opinions. The session facilitators should try to foster a supportive and open atmosphere. The discussions will take place at different times (weekday, weekend, morning and evening) in order to accommodate the participants' schedules. Publicity is vital for bringing in participation. Posters, informational brochures, advertisements on the radio, in newspapers, on buses and in stations are some possible ideas.

*A National Conference* on College Admission and the SAT will encourage scholars and educators to research and find evidence to evaluate the reliability and validity of the SAT. Although many scholars have researched the SAT, data confidentiality always prevents a large scale cross-college study or comprehensive study accounting for students' characteristic. The conference would put the issue under the spotlight, and the resulting research will definitely benefit colleges and universities in their admission process. It would ease the process of obtaining data, since the colleges researchers belong to would more likely to trust the researchers and the intention of the conference.

*Video competitions, writing contests and music compositions* will be the channel for students to describe their college preparatory experience. High schools should encourage their students to take part in these events. Writing contests can perhaps be worked out in English classes. It is important to hear the voice of the students, since they are or will be affected the most in college admissions; however, policy makers, testing companies and schools often mute the voice of the students. Even though many adults have gone through the same pathway to colleges, time and experience make them forgetful. Therefore, we should value and encourage the voice of our students.

All in all, these three channels hope to raise public awareness, to provoke thinking, and to initiate debate with questions like:

- ◆ What does the SAT really measure?
- ◆ What is your experience with the SAT?
- ◆ Who benefits from the SAT?
- ◆ Who is negatively influenced by the SAT?
- ◆ Is the SAT biased? If so, how?
- ◆ How can the SAT be improved?
- ◆ What are some other ideas for college admission?
- ◆ How should college applicants be assessed? What should be the goal of admission?

These channels will also minimize barriers and help create allies for those who are willing to make a change in the system.

### ***Stage II: Equal Opportunity***

This stage belongs to the phase of “Coalescing” and “Creating chance” in the Cycle of Liberation. Having inspired and awakened minds, the next step is to step out and to liberate. The SAT is not perfect; it is a test with many faults if not bias. This initiative does not insist of making the SAT optional for all colleges, but rather trying to work with the SAT and the information it provides. Targeting concerns regarding racial, socioeconomic and gender bias, this transitional phase aims at leveling the field by bringing everyone up and providing resources that would benefit all students.

*Career Development Center (CDC)* in each school district will be a great way to provide students with resources and services. R.E.C. will partner with community centers, public libraries or local high schools to develop this opportunity. The personnel in the CDCs will be responsible for searching for information about colleges and scholarship opportunity. They will then update the information in the R.E.C. CDC online database. Students can have remote access from the internet at home, from school or the CDC. The CDC will also provide one-on-one, small group, or class-based counseling to inform and assist students with their post-secondary decisions. Furthermore, the CDC will provide help with admission essay and interview. CDC will also try to reach out to students by providing visits every fall semester to inform them about their college options and the services provided at the center. The creation of CDC will benefit all students since only a handful of high schools provide extensive post-secondary information and services to their students.

*Reducing score gaps* will be another priority of R.E.C. Currently, the huge score gaps between income and racial groups have led scholars and colleges to doubt the validity of the common yardstick – the SAT. As of 2008, more than 280 colleges have made the SAT optional. According to the National Center for Fair & Open Test, the SAT has failed to address the “long-standing concerns about the exam’s biases and predictive value.”<sup>2</sup> The Education Testing Service (ETS) and the College Board are losing market shares to the more consumer-friendly ACT. First, R.E.C. would like to invite the ETS and test preparation companies to join this initiative to minimize socioeconomic bias. Second, the College Board should simplify the waiver procedure for low-income students. Although the waiver can potentially benefit low income students, many test takers either do not know about it or do not know how to receive it. The waiver process is very complicated right now. Besides simplifying the waiver procedure, the College Board can also guide the waiver process with an online video clip. Fourth, the ETS should consider a free or reduced price for PSAT or online test preparation materials for students with waiver. Fifth, the community can also join in reducing score gaps by volunteering to tutor students. Perhaps R.E.C. can partner with colleges to grant college students credit if they volunteer to be SAT tutor. All this tutoring can take place in the CDC or in high schools.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fairtest.org/sat-scores-2008-release>

Stage II is the action piece of leveling the education field while bringing everyone up, with a focus and priority on districts that lack funds and resources. All students will benefit from more resources, counseling service and tutoring. Their improvement in test scores and increased chance of getting to the “right” place will also benefit society by generating more and better-equipped professionals and worker in the future. The implementation of R.E.C. will also create many jobs for the sluggish economy. Instead of tax return initiatives, to which the public are always hesitant to respond, creating long-term jobs with a meaningful cause can have a calming effect on the public. The *Reducing test score* approach will also benefit testing companies also by minimizing the bias of their tests and possibly increasing their market share. In short, this initiative can be a win-win situation for everyone.

### ***Stage III: Real Standard***

Stage III also belongs to the “Creating Change” phrase of the Cycle of Liberation. While Stage I and Stage II are more like short and intermediate term steps, respectively, Stage III is a long term plan to reshape college admission targeting the goal of admission and standard.

The community dialogues from Stage I would continue to be carried out through Stage II & III, though not as intensely. The community would have identified allies and what they see as admissions goals. Stage III urges colleges to rethink their admissions goals and shift away focus from the SAT to curriculum based indicators or the use of multiple assessments, which would also grant a more equal opportunity and access to all students. Every college has a different goal and should adjust its admissions assessments accordingly. For example, a selective midwestern 4-year liberal art college that I interviewed at prioritizes academic strength. Aside from the SAT, admission officers also look at high school transcript data to observe trends in students’ grades. Then they look at the applicant’s personal statement and other supplemental information to determine whether the student would help create an interesting and diversified freshman class.

In recent year, more colleges have given more weight to the admissions tests. According to the report of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, colleges that give standardized-test scores “considerable importance” in their admission decision have increased from around 50 percentage to around 60 percentage over the last decade. From its most recent member survey (2006), more colleges have placed equal weight on both college-preparatory courses and the strength of high-school curriculum; less than 25% of the colleges and universities reported giving such weight to class rank. Many researchers have accused selective colleges of giving admission tests like the SAT too much weight (Schmidt 2008) to bolster their college-guide ranking, and as a result, compromise the diversity of the colleges and contribute to inequity in college access. With all that, the R.E.C proposes to take the SAT off the formula in ranking and instead substitute it with students’ high school grades and other measures that would contribute to reducing the achievement gap of the applicants.

Stage III is also a time for innovation and trial. Many progressive colleges have tried various new college admission ideas to assess students in their full complexity,

considering not only “grades and test scores, but also what students have made of their opportunities to learn, the obstacles they have over come and the special talents they possess” (Atkinson 2002). Here are some admission ideas:

- ◆ *Eligibility in Local Context* (ELC) or the Four Percent plan (at University of California/ UC): ELC grants UC eligibility to students in the top four percentage of their high school graduating class, who have also completed the required college preparatory course for UC. The participation rate is as high as 97% for California high schools, where many schools have sent only a few or no students to UC.
- ◆ *Dual Admission program* (at UC): Students fall between the top four percent and 12.5 percent of their high school graduating class would be admitted simultaneously to a community college and then to UC, with solid grades to prove that they have fulfilled their freshman and sophomore requirements at a community college before transferring to UC.
- ◆ *Two tiers admission* (at UC): 50 to 75 percent of students are admitted in the first tier based on a formula that heavily weights high school grades and test score. In the second tier, the assessment of students will include a range of supplemental criteria; for example, the difficulty of courses taken, leadership experience, or response to consistent challenges, in addition to quantitative measures.
- ◆ *Creative Essay* (at Tufts University): The University will ask applicants to show original thinking and imagination in their optional essay, for example, an alternative version of history: What if civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks had given up her seat on the bus? Or, an off-the-wall mini-story with the title, “My roommate is a space alien”<sup>3</sup> Or a judgment question, “Your classmate has the answer key to a test and has offered to share it with you. What would you do?” The questions are designed and evaluated based on psychological research, with which Tufts officials hope to better identify future leaders and predict college GPA.
- ◆ *Challenge Day* (at Singapore Management University/ SMU): SMU Applicants organize a day when applicants come together to the campus and play games, solve problems and participate in team work activities. Alumni and staff mix in with the applicants to observe their problem-solving, conflict management and team-building skills. In the U.S., it would be possible if the college officers travel to different states and cooperate with local alumni to organize a similar event in local CDC.
- ◆ *In State Interview*: Many college officers travel to different states and even countries to interview potential freshmen. After looking over applicants’ personal statements and high school records, officers choose some promising students to interview with. This way, interviews can be used as a criterion to select applicants. Besides, students who cannot afford transportation to the colleges can also get interviewed in their own states. It may seem expensive for colleges; however, interviews will give colleges a better sense of and more information about the complexity of the applicants.

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<sup>3</sup> Tufts gets creative on admissions:

[http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2006/07/06/tufts\\_gets\\_creative\\_on\\_admissions/](http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2006/07/06/tufts_gets_creative_on_admissions/)

R.E.C. encourages institutions to try out different admissions ideas and slowly move away from test scores to curriculum-based or other creative measures. Many of these ideas are relatively new. R.E.C. would consider creating a web site to summarize and organize all research project and experiment of the best admission practice.

### **Conclusion**

Equity and Efficiency in College access are vital to generating productive work force and professionals in the near future. Many researchers and institution have begun to see the problem of the SAT and have seen the need for a change in the current admissions system. The three stages reform initiative, R.E.C., aims at transitioning the current situation in finding a real standard. The main tools are leveling the education field, providing college admissions resources & service, and reducing the SAT score gaps. This initiative calls on community involvement and decision to support our future generation together. In the long run, R.E.C. is beneficial to everyone. Our society needs us to work with one another in the community to build the common good for all – equity and efficiency in college access.

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Steele, Claude M. "NOT JUST A TEST." *The Nation*. 278, no. 17 (2004): 38

A short and humorous article explain the “ability paradigm”, rationale behind meritocratic efficiency. The article further pointed out how the paradigm has gone against the spirit of *Brown*.

Web Site:

FairTest. <http://www.fairtest.org/>

An organized and informed website of The National Venter for Fair and Open Testing, which devote into ending misuse and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure fair evaluation of students, teachers, and schools. It contains many information about the SAT-optional movement among institutions in the U.S.

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