

0. *Pre-read for context.*

1. *Close read the text for understanding.*

2. *Analytically read, performing one of the five different analytical reading tasks.*

3. *Write a one-page reflection, connecting this article to your own experiences, reading, or observations.*

## **The College Board Tries to Solve a Problem That It's Unsited to Solve**

by George Will, *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2019

WASHINGTON -- The earnest improvers at the College Board, which administers the SAT, should ponder Abraham Maslow's law of the instrument. In 1966, Maslow, a psychologist, said essentially this: If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. The College Board wants to solve a complex social problem that it and its test are unsited to solve.

The College Board has embraced a dubious idea that might have the beneficial effect of prompting college admissions officers to think of better ideas for broadening their pool of applicants. The idea is to add to the scores of some test-takers an "environmental context" bonus. Strangely, board president David Coleman told the Wall Street Journal's Daniel Henninger that this is not, as the media has named it, an "adversity index." But it is: It purports to measure 15 factors (e.g., poverty or food-stamp eligibility, crime rates, disorderly schools, broken families, families with education deficits, etc.) where these test-takers are situated. Coleman more convincingly says to The New York Times: "This is about finding young people who do a great deal with what they've been given."

Perhaps the board's evident discomfort with the label "adversity score" is because their more benign-sounding "environmental context" gives a social-science patina to the obverse of a category (and political accusation) currently in vogue, that of "privilege." By whatever name, however, the SAT's new metric is another step down the path of identity politics, assigning applicants to groups and categories, and another step away from evaluating individuals individually. But if the adversity metric becomes a substitute for schools emphasizing race, this will be an improvement on explicit racial categories that become implicit quotas.

The SAT was created partly to solve the problem of inequitable standards in college admissions. They too often rewarded nonacademic attributes (e.g., "legacies" -- the children of alumni). And they facilitated the intergenerational transmission of inherited privileges. Most importantly, they were used to disfavor certain groups, particularly Jews.

By making an objective -- meaning standardized -- test one component of schools' assessments of applicants, it advanced the American ideal of a meritocracy open to all

talents. However, it has always been the schools' prerogative to decide the importance of the SAT component relative to others. And as "diversity" (understood in various ways) becomes an increasing preoccupation of schools, the SAT becomes decreasingly important.

Any adversity index derived from this or that social "context," however refined, will be an extremely crude instrument for measuring -- guessing, actually -- the academic prospects of individuals in those contexts. It might, however, be a good gauge of character. Physicists speak of the "escape velocity" of particles circling in an orbit. Perhaps the adversity index can indicate individuals who, by their resilience, have achieved velocity out of challenging social environments.

But the SAT is a flimsy tool for shaping the world of social inertia. Articulate, confident parents from the professions will transmit cultural advantages to their children, advantages that, as the SAT will record them, are apt to dwarf "adversity" bonuses. As Andrew Ferguson, author of the grimly hilarious "Crazy U: One Dad's Crash Course in Getting His Kid into College," says, America's least diverse classes are SAT prep classes.

The Chicago Tribune warns, plausibly, that the "secret-sauce" of the SAT's adversity score -- schools will know it, applicants will not -- will "breed more public mistrust" of colleges' admissions processes. But calling, as the Tribune does, for more "transparency" implies that the more admissions' criteria are made public, the better. However, private deliberations and criteria about applicants protect the applicants' privacy interests. Furthermore, asserting a public interest in maximum transparency encourages government supervision of -- and the inevitable shrinking of -- schools' discretion in shaping their student bodies, and ensuring that some cohorts are not largely excluded.

Unquestionably, such discretion often is employed in unsavory ways to serve academia's fluctuating "diversity" obsessions, some of which contravene common understandings of equity and perhaps civil rights laws and norms. Soon a Boston court will render a decision, probably destined for Supreme Court review, in the case concerning Harvard's "holistic" metrics, beyond "objective" ones (secondary school transcripts, standardized tests), for -- it is alleged -- the purpose of restricting the admission of Asian Americans. They, like the Jews whose academic proficiency was a "problem" eight decades ago, often come from family cultures that stress academic attainments.

Caution, however, is in order. Further breaking higher education to the saddle of the state is an imprudent (and, which is much the same thing, unconservative) objective.