

In Defence of Standardized Testing

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Standardized tests have already been eliminated in a number of educational institutes. (Patrick T. Fallon/AFP via Getty Images)



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Commentary

There's been a lot of noise about getting rid of standardized exams. Supposedly, minorities are [at a disadvantage](#) with them. Consequently, the argument runs, doing away with standardized exams will allow

more minorities to enter into prestigious career paths, enhancing “social justice.”

If you look more closely at the history of standardized exams, however, this isn't true. Instead, getting rid of standardized exams serves the interests of an elite class—and will permanently lock minorities and entire classes of people out of social advancement.

Standardized tests have already been eliminated in a number of places. Oregon, Wisconsin, and New Hampshire **no longer have bar exams**. The **University of California** no longer uses Standardized Admission Tests as part of its entrance requirement, just like SUNY and an association of Ivy League universities. And in Canada, **many provinces are decreasing the use of standardized tests**.

But here's the problem. Without the tests, how do we decide who gets admitted to university? (Unless, as in the movie “**Idiocracy**,” we get rid of them.) How do we decide who becomes a lawyer **or a doctor**?

The most famous example of a standardized exam is the **Public Service Commission Test** used to vet applications for government civil service. If we do away with those, how do we decide who is qualified to become a public servant?

Civil service examinations have been around for thousands of years. Imperial China used the examinations to allow young men **from any social class** or background to enter the imperial bureaucracy. Before that, and during dynasties where the exams were not used, entry into the patrician or bureaucratic class had been restricted by birth.

Of course, entry still wasn't easy. In imperial China, even more than today, you wouldn't have the resources to study for the difficult standard exams unless you had access to money. Then, as now, money was a good indicator of success.

But the point is that money wasn't the only indicator. In fact, the imperial system came to run the exams as a double blind, going so far as to have exam **responses copied** out by another person, to ensure

that nobody received favourable grading because a grader recognized their calligraphy.

The China's worst times are instructive for us, too. When the Mongol Yuan dynasty took over, they did away with the exams. When they returned them, only 25 percent of the exam seats were allotted to the majority Han Chinese ethnicity. How did they decide which Han wrote the exams? Letters of reference, of course, from existing bureaucrats or their Mongol overlords. Without open standardized exams, in other words, advancement was based on who you knew.

That's becoming true in the West today—complete with attempts at Yuan-style race-based admissions.

As anybody who has ever applied to an elite university knows, **reference letters are already important**. If you're entering a profession like **medicine** or law, a good reference letter can mean the difference between getting that coveted residency and not. Reference letters already **reinforce pedigree**—what university or prep school you attended. Even admissions specialists who hate reference letters admit they make a difference—and expensive prep schools write **much better reference letters**.

In the absence of standardized tests and grading, reference letters will become even more important. And how are those rated? By who wrote them. The letter from an elite prep school is noticed as a letter from an elite school, regardless of content, and that tells the admissions expert what she or he needs to know.

Who decides who becomes a lawyer? The partners in the law firms. And how will they choose their candidates? In the absence of a standardized bar exam, admission will depend on who the partners know. The same is true for doctors.

If we wind up doing away with the public service admission tests, worse will follow. Imagine a government whose civil service is hired based on who they know. The West has been here before—but not since the days of the absolute monarchs.

So, who benefits from ending standardized tests? We suspect it is not the students.

There is a sort of feedback loop inside the education industry, when the same people designing the curriculum are the ones testing for it. Internal tests such as “[performance-based assessment](#)” check only to see if the students can do what the teacher told them to do. They don’t check to see if it will help the student in the environment that they are going to. In other words, little Suzy may consistently get top marks for her “holistic” language arts classes—but when she graduates, outsiders find that she can’t read or write.

Externally administered standardized tests are the best way to make sure that the education system helps anyone aside from the teachers’ unions.

You know who isn’t interested in dropping standardized test scores? Minorities who aren’t part of the “favoured” few. Part of the reason that elite U.S. universities are dropping standardized exams is that the U.S. Supreme Court [told them](#) that they couldn’t have race-based admission courses that left Asian-American students out in the cold. [Dropping](#) standardized tests allows universities to engage in discrimination without legal pushback. The racial policies of the Yuan and Qin dynasties live again in the Ivy League.

Today, the abandonment of standardized testing is done specifically to disadvantage poor whites, as well as Asian students. The official reason given is that institutions—which claim to be guided by the highest ideals—can favour African American and Hispanic students in the United States, and (hopefully) First Nations in Canada. In the name of social justice, of course.

But without standardized tests, admission decisions are arbitrary. Tomorrow, African-Americans, Hispanics, and First Nations may find that not all of them are favoured. Instead, favour will go to particular African American families, particular Hispanic families, and particular First Nations families. Skin tone doesn’t tell us the real story here.

The simple truth of North American society is that we are developing a class system. Those trying to get rid of standardized testing tell us outright that their motive is to decide who joins their social class of educated functionaries. They are trying to restrict entry. They are trying to become a self-selecting aristocracy.

The only mechanism that ensures everyone with academic ability can have access to universities, professions, and civil service is standardized exams. We abandon them at our peril.

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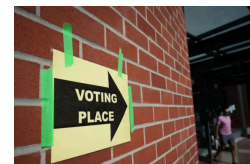
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