

SAT is on its way to court



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A lawsuit filed against Educational Testing Service by a black high school senior promises to challenge the historic influence that the testing industry has maintained over college aspirants.

Cynthia Hogg, a basketball star from Lincoln High School in Dallas, is determined to get the athletic scholarship she needs to attend the college of her choice. The main roadblock to her realizing those dreams, however, is Educational Testing Service.

Despite the fact that Miss Hogg has taken the Scholastic Assessment Test six times — three times in her junior year and three times in her senior year — Educational Testing has refused to send her scores to her selected college because she is suspected of cheating.

All of Miss Hogg's earlier test scores were under 500; all of her later test scores were 800 or higher, better than the 700 required by the National Collegiate Athletic Association. According to William Webster, the school district's head of testing, Miss Hogg's high school achievement appears consistent with her later scores.

Curiously, not one of the testing monitors at the six examination sites, which included Educational Testing staff in one case, actually observed Miss Hogg cheating. Nonetheless, the testing service stands firmly behind its statistical conclusions and arrogantly offers Miss Hogg yet one more opportunity to retake the exam.

Understandably, she refused the offer and decided to go to court. A September trial has been set.

Although the court case will focus on Miss Hogg's character, it also should look at Educational Testing and the testing industry in general. Indeed, the testing service should be required to address the following questions:

- Although Miss Hogg's patterns of right and wrong answers on her tests revealed strong similarities to individuals sitting next to her, did those patterns also show similarities to test takers at other examination sites? If so, the similarities may be nothing more than random events — not actual cheating.

- How valid are Educational Testing's statistical formulas in detecting cheating? To be credible, the testing service should be able to show that its statistical predictions of cheating are strongly correlated with observable behavior. Otherwise, the statistical analysis is merely an academic exercise.

- Are the statistical analyses of cheating colorblind? A few years ago, some Hispanic students were incorrectly suspected of cheating by similar analyses. It would be interesting to analyze the race distribution of all test takers suspected of cheating to determine if the cheating formula is really colorblind.

- Why has Educational Testing chosen to ignore the abundance of research that confirms the similarity in test-taking behavior among blacks and Hispanics? For example, black and Hispanic students experience more anxiety over tests, react negatively to restrictive time limits and appear more confused about the value of changing answers and guessing. It is precisely this type of test behavior, however, that responds positively to short-term instructional interventions or coaching.

The stakes for Educational Testing may be higher than it cares to admit. Test security issues notwithstanding, the value of the SAT in selecting college applicants seems to be waning, as colleges increasingly feel compelled to give admitted students additional tests for remedial course work.

Apparently, the test is not doing a satisfactory job of screening students for college work, although the test does make the work of college admissions easier to explain and implement.

But above all else, the court case is key to the future of all students planning to go to college, especially blacks and Hispanics. Educational Testing should not be allowed the legal discretion to question the character of students who show academic potential unless concrete, observable evidence can be produced to support such inferences.

If the testing service prevails in the lawsuit, promising black and Hispanic college aspirants could be discouraged from attaining higher education and much needed scholarships. Miss Hogg should be given all the community support she needs to prevail.

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