In the 1990s, critics charged that the once iconic Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, was culturally biased and did not measure innate intelligence. The Education Testing Service, which designs, administers, and grades the exam, responded with a name change.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test became the Scholastic Assessment Test. A few years later, this virtually meaningless acronym was dropped altogether. SAT no longer stands for anything.

In "Uneducated Guesses," Howard Wainer, who served as principal research scientist for ETS for two decades, defends the SAT. The test is designed to be fair to all students, he insists; it measures developed intelligence and has been "remarkably successful" in predicting performance in college.

Wainer then uses sophisticated quantitative techniques to blast the conventional wisdom among many educational "experts" about the use of tests in the evaluation and selection of students.

"Uneducated Guesses" is not an easy read. Wainer does not adequately set the context for his critique by explaining the evolving role (and value) of SATs, ACTs, Achievement tests and AP exams in college admissions.

And his empirical analysis requires readers to push themselves to understand graphs, means, medians, value-added models, causal inference, and the difference between "ignorable missingness" and "non-ignorable missingness."

Nonetheless, with its timely reminder that high stakes decisions often rely on anecdotes, laden with emotion, and that "the plural of anecdote is not data," "Uneducated Guesses" ought to be read by anyone who is concerned about the weaknesses (and wrong-headed assumptions) in current educational policies.

Wainer's data demonstrates, for example, that colleges which give students the option of taking the SAT will admit students who perform less well than their classmates, on average, in their first-year courses. The policy, Wainer points out, also allows colleges to "game" the influential US News & World Report rankings, which use mean SAT scores as a variable.

"Uneducated Guesses" supplies fascinating insights into AP exams, as well. Acknowledging that the level of difficulty for these tests varies by subject matter, Wainer reveals that the PSAT is a better predictor of success for APs than high school grades or teacher recommendations.

Except for calculus, chemistry, physics, and computer science, he believes that a major expansion to AP achievement is feasible for inner-city kids as well as young men and women in the suburbs.

It won't happen, however, until and unless high school administrators become willing to provide resources for more AP classes - and accept the possible loss of prestige that could accompany a smaller percentage of high scores on AP tests.

"Uneducated Guesses" ends with a warning. Educational issues these days are highly charged - and even more highly politicized. It has become fashionable, Wainer notes, to link the pay of teachers to the performance of their students on tests - even though we don't know how to establish a causal connection between the two.
A better way to promote positive change, he emphasizes, starts with a commitment to use evidence, "and not the power of authority or faith." He is not confident, alas, that this approach will carry the day.

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