

Question-askers being quizzed

By CHRIS CONNELL
Associated Press Writer
PRINCETON, N.J. (AP) — More and more people are asking questions about the professional question askers.

Who gives the tests that permit or deny entry to colleges and professions for millions of people each year? Are the tests fair? Are they misused?

The questions become more important as interest rises in minority admissions to college and as it becomes more difficult each year to get into law and medical schools. Many of the questions — from parents, educators and lawmakers — are directed at the Educational Testing Service, the titan of the testing industry.

On a bucolic 400-acre campus outside this well-heeled university town, its 2,000 employees go quietly about their business, constructing and processing the multiple-choice exams that can raise or dash the hopes of several million people a year.

Success or failure on the flagship ETS exam, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, can determine whether a student attends the college of his choice. Other tests help choose entrants for dozens of occupations, from podiatry and police work to architecture and auto mechanics. The State Department uses an ETS test for Foreign Service officers. And ETS, with questions supplied by the Central Intelligence Agency, even tests prospective spies.

Among those who question the ETS tests is Peter J. Liacouras, dean of Temple University Law School. He says ETS is becoming "the cradle-to-grave arbiter of social mobility in America."

Its tests inhibit "well-roundedness" and reward "the skilled test-takers, hip-shooters and crossword puzzle whizzes," Liacouras says. He thinks law schools put too much emphasis on ETS' Law School Admission Test scores.

William W. Turnbull, 58, a Canadian-born psychologist who joined ETS shortly after its creation and became president in 1970, bristles at the notion that ETS is America's "arbiter of social mobility."

"That's nonsense," he says. "We are makers of gates, and other people have to decide whether to open them or not. Gates serve to get people through fences, as well as to keep them out."

"The people at Temple and other universities have to make the admissions decisions. We have zero to say about who gets in anywhere."

Some criticisms apply to all standardized testing. Minorities generally fare worse than whites on these tests, and some minority groups say the tests are biased.

Blacks and certain other minorities score 100 points or more below the national average on the LSAT and the widely-used Scholastic Aptitude Test, familiarly known as SAT. Both are graded on a scale of 200 to 800.

ETS officials screen test questions to eliminate overtones of race in five forms, and the LSAT five times in separate editions. The al or sexual bias. And they insist that the difference stems not from cultural or racial bias in their tests, but from the more sweeping bias of poverty and inferior schooling. Turnbull calls it a "bias of opportunity."

Kenneth B. Clark, psychologist and educator, says the problem lies not with the tests, but with how they are used.

"I'm not against exams," he says. "I'm against their abuse and making distorted and exaggerated claims about what they show."

He says the value of ETS' tests depends upon "how skillfully, intelligently and humanely they are used. You can use almost anything in an idiotic, exclusionary and dehumanizing way."

Test critics forget that errors also are made in grading students' essays, interviews, references and classwork, Turnbull says. The SAT became popular with colleges in the 1940s because it "provided a

common currency that was impervious to the differences in grading between schools and between parts of the country."

a diminished role for the SAT and a rival test offered by the American College Testing Program of Iowa City.

"As school enrollments continue to decline, and as colleges compete to recruit students, the importance of admissions tests as selective devices will be less than ever," she said.

The number of SATs given annually already has fallen to 1.4 million from a peak of 1.6 million in 1970.

But the competition remains intense to get into professional schools, where the test scores traditionally have played an even bigger role. The student usually can go elsewhere, but those rejected by a medical or law school may be left out in the cold.

Two students compete for every space in first-year law and medical classes, and academic experts agree that many who are rejected are capable of doing the work to become lawyers and doctors.

Congress and several state legislatures have begun considering ways to require test-makers to reveal more information about their tests.

Rep. Michael Harrington, D-Mass., wants standardized test questions released within the correct answers 30 days after the exam date. He also has proposed denying federal funds to any school that uses test scores as cutoff points for admission.



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