Ricci, C. (in press). [Review of the book *Rethinking the SAT: The Future of Standardized Testing in University Admissions*]. *Interchange.*

Zwick, R. (Ed.). (2004). Rethinking the SAT: The Future of Standardized Testing in University Admissions. New York: Routledge. Softcover, 361 pages.

In February 2001 the University of California president Richard C. Atkinson gave a speech recommending the elimination of the SAT 1 as a criterion for admission to the university; instead, he advocated for admission tests that are closely tied to the high school curriculum (p. ix). In sum, he advocated replacing aptitude tests with achievement tests. His speech reignited ongoing controversies about the use of standardized admission exams (SAE). So the Academic Senate Center for Faculty Outreach and the Committee on Admissions and Enrollment at the University of California decided to sponsor a conference in November 2001 "that would allow educators and researchers to engage in a public discussion of these issues" (p. xiv), and that conference led to this book. Among those that the book is for are college and university officials; high school principals, teachers and guidance councilors; parents of high school students; legislators and educational policy makers; and members of the press (p. xiv).

The book is divided into four sections: Part 1, *Standardized Tests and American Education: What is the Past and Future of College Admission Testing in the United States?* Part 2, *College Admissions Testing in the California: How Did the California SAT Debate Arise?* Part 3, *Race, Class, and Admissions Testing: How Are Test Scores Related to Student Background and Academic Preparation?* Part 4, *The Predictive Value of Admissions Tests: How Well Do Tests Predict Academic Success for Students from a Variety of Backgrounds?* After each of the sections, experts in higher education and testing were assembled to write commentaries.

Rethinking the SAT addresses the following themes:

> What is the Purpose of college admission testing? What is the history of admission testing in California and elsewhere? How are admission test scores related to students' cultural background and academic preparation? How well do these tests predict academic success? Most basically, the book's authors address the question, How should we decide which students get the opportunity to go to the college of their choice? ...What is the most equitable way to allocate the limited number of slots in prestigious schools? (p. x)

When I was reading the book, the more serious the authors were, the more frightened I became. I felt like I was reading an Orwell or an Atwood: a book about a distopia. Each of the authors recognizes the limitations of SAEs, and yet all but one continues to endorse its use. For example, Richard C. Atkinson writes, "We will never devise the perfect test: a test that accurately assesses students irrespective of parental education and income, the quality of local schools, and the kind of community students live in. But we can do better. We can do much better" (p. 22). Given that we are playing with peoples lives, better or much better is not good enough. To further support my feeling that the book feels like a distopia, David F. Lohman writes, "The goal of aptitude testing, is to make predictions about the individual's likelihood of success and satisfaction in some yet to be experienced situation on the basis of present behavior" (p. 45). The truth is that no one and no measure can accurately do this. We can never know someone's future potential and so should not be playing such a harmful game with people's lives.

The chapter by Christina Perez is the most refreshing. She writes, "Public debate has largely focused on the question of *which* admissions tests to use rather than *whether*

or not an exam is needed" (p. 345). She goes on to question why the need for any SAE at all, and then offers examples of alternatives to standardized admissions test that exist as well as schools that have adopted the alternatives.

One caution is that some of the articles read like commercials and are pure propaganda. It is clear that the writers know their market and are pitching to it. For example, the chief executive officer of ACT, Inc. Richard Ferguson's sales pitch reads as follows:

> We hope that, as you are considering the challenges you are facing, you will look very closely at the ACT Assessment. It is an achievement testing program that has a long history of very successful use in widely diverse settings throughout the nation. Even more important, it offers many of the attributes that you have so carefully and thoughtfully identified as important to the future of the admissions process in the State of California. (p. 32)

Sales pitches have no place in an academic book that is seriously interested in discussing substantive issues. Gaston Caperton president of the College Board (administer the SAT), in his piece, does no better. He continually and shamelessly praises the University of California (his current audience) and aggrandizes his tests with words like, "We feel we have the best tests in the world" (p.35).

The most frustrating part of reading this book is the repetition. The same information, definition of terms and historical accounts are repeated over and over and over and over. This detracts from the flow of the book. Even the commentaries at the end of each section, in which I had a lot of hope since Rebecca Zwick tells us that experts in higher education and testing were assembled to write them, often amount to summaries of

the papers. This is made worse because the papers are already summarized at the beginning of each part.

Rebecca Zwick makes a powerful point but ends with a boggling conclusion in favour of SAEs. She writes,

> To what degree should college admission depend on previous academic achievement? Any measure of applicants' past academic accomplishment is, in part, a reflection of the K-12 educational system with all its flaws and imbalances, and an admissions process that focuses too heavily on previous achievement, whether test scores, grades, or course background, will perpetuate these inequities. (p. 214)

She is right about this, but wrong in concluding that we should therefore keep SAEs. Essentially, she is arguing that since there are other inequities in admissions and education in general, then we should ignore the inequities inherent in SAEs. Zwick's argument here exposes the limitations of Perez's alternatives to SAEs because ultimately Perez's alternatives still rely on some type of grading. The solution is nothing short of rethinking education. Michael E. Martinez suggests that, "The larger and more difficult problem is one whose solution will depend on reconceptualizing the entire enterprise of academic readiness and the meaning of education" (p.242). I suspect he is right.

Roger E. Studley points out an interesting dilemma and exposes how complicated it can be when admitting students using SAEs. What would you do in the following situation? Imagine you have two applicants both with a 3.7 high school grade point average but who come from very different schools and family backgrounds. The one applicant's school sends few students to college, neither parents has a college degree, and

is poor. She scores 1190 on the SAT 1 and the average score for a person with these circumstances is 900. The other applicant comes from more advantaged circumstances and scores a 1290 on the SAT 1, and the average score for this applicant's circumstance is 1200. The dilemma he proposes is as follows:

> If the college must choose between these two students, should it select the more advantaged student who scored 90 points better than expected? Or should it select the disadvantaged student who, despite scoring 100 points lower, surpassed expectations by 290 points, more than three times the margin achieved by her peer? (p. 321)

Overall, the book offers an interested history of SAEs, and presents issues that readers will find engaging. However, I would like to have seen included a chapter that exposes the big business of SAEs. There are hints of it throughout the book, but only in disconnected bits and pieces. As well, I think the book would have benefited from a chapter exposing the politics of SAEs that outlines the connection between high profile politicians and those who are financially benefiting most from SAEs. Given the increased proliferation of standardized testing in Canada, I could envision our postsecondary institutions relying on SAEs. This book serves as a good introduction to the frightening issues that we, as Canadians, may one day have to face.

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