PUTTING THE SAT TO THE TEST: The SAT and College Admissions

Richard Atkinson, president of the University of California system has called for eliminating the use of the Scholastic Aptitude Test in college admissions, saying that "America's overemphasis on the SAT is compromising our educational system." Is President Atkinson right or not? Is the SAT an objective measure of the ability to succeed in college? Or is the SAT biased, as some argue, against minority students? And if universities drop the SAT, what would they use in its place? Guests: M.R.C. Greenwood, Chancellor, University of California, Santa Cruz. Martin Trow, Professor of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley. Jay Rosner, Executive Director, The Princeton Review Foundation.

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Peter Robinson: Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson. Our show today, Giving a Grade to the SAT. Every year millions of high school students engage in an educational right of passage, taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test. In preparation, they spend countless hours and dollars taking SAT review courses and buying books and software to practice questions like this, "Acrophobia is to heights as hydrophobia is to dogs, claustrophobia is to shelter." The question on our show today is whether it's all a big mistake. No less a figure than Richard Atkinson, President of the University of California thinks so. He has suggested that the UC system should drop the SAT from its admissions process.

So, is the SAT an objective and accurate indicator of how well students are likely to do in college or is it, as some argue, subjective and biased particularly against certain minorities? And if universities did drop the SAT, what would they use in its place?

With us today, three guests. M.R.C. Greenwood is Chancellor of the University of California at Santa Cruz. Jay Rosner is Executive Director of the Princeton Review Foundation. And Martin Trow is a Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley.

Title: Running from the Numbers

Peter Robinson: Richard C. Atkinson, President of the University of California, I quote, "Universities use SAT scores to rank order applicants in determining who should be admitted. This use of the SAT is not compatible with the American view on how merit
should be defined and opportunities distributed. America's over-emphasis on the SAT is compromising our educational system." The SAT compromising American education. Is he right or is he wrong? Jay?

**Jay Rosner:** He's right and he's courageous in taking that position.

[Talking at same time]

**Peter Robinson:** He's wrong?

**Martin Trow:** He is wrong.

**Peter Robinson:** M.R.C.?

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** I think he's right.

**Peter Robinson:** Two to one. Two to one. We'll--we'll--we'll--we'll come to you.

**Martin Trow:** That doesn't trouble me.

**Peter Robinson:** Doctor Atkinson, part of the speech we've just been quoting, has asked the University of California Academic Senate to consider two changes in the way it conducts admissions. The first one is this, again I'm quoting him, "Require only standardized tests that assess mastery of specific areas rather than undefined notions of aptitude or intelligence," closed quote. In other words, keep the SAT II tests, which are achievement tests, English, math, physics and so forth, but dump the SAT I test, which is the test that for decades now, students across the country who wanted to go to college have taken. But there is at least an opening problem that this layman sees. You can tell me why it's not a problem. If you dump the SAT, you are dumping the instrument that admissions officers have used to find diamonds in the rough. That is, smart, capable kids who have been stuck in lousy schools where they couldn't learn much. Isn't that a serious problem?

**Jay Rosner:** That could be a problem if it's not correctly handled. I always point to Bates College as an example of the school that's…

**Peter Robinson:** Bates is…

**Jay Rosner:** SA…

**Peter Robinson:** …smallish Liberal Arts College in Maine, am I remembering that correctly?

**Jay Rosner:** That's correct. And it's a small school but Bates has been doing an SAT optional admissions process for a dozen years. A student who feels the SAT is a strength can submit it. A student who feels that the SAT is not relevant, needn't submit. And the
admissions officers at Bates are intelligent enough to make good decisions and they take the time, and it does take time, to pick really good classes, diverse classes for…

**Peter Robinson:** So you are supposing that the diamond in the rough will recognize that he or she is a diamond in the rough, see that the SAT score is pretty high or there will be a good guidance counselor in the high school and say, you should use this when you apply to Bates. And so getting rid of the SAT I won't hurt a bit.

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** I think the--the argument that the SAT I is now identifying diamonds in the rough is overrated. I think there are, of course, always exceptions to any rule. They'll be exceptions to GPA as a good marker for success in college. There will be exceptions to SAT II. And I'm sure that there would be the occasional student that might get discovered because of the SAT I. And right now, at least our data on over eighty thousand students show that the SAT II and the GPA is probably a better predictor of success in college than the SAT I. Although the SAT I does add a little additional accuracy, it probably doesn't add nearly as much as the other two factors.

**Peter Robinson:** Martin?

**Martin Trow:** Atkinson says that--that the SAT I is over-emphasized. I think that's…

[Talking at same time]

**Peter Robinson:** It's the quotation for sure.

**Martin Trow:** But it only accounts for about twenty percent of the total set of factors that enter into entry to the university. Fifty percent is based on GPA and another thirty percent on other factors that they now sort of refer to as holistic characteristics of the student. So we're really only talking about a marginal use of the SAT. I don't think anybody argues that the SAT should be the sole criteria. But to lose that twenty percent is to lose quite a lot. It function…

[Talking at same time]

**Peter Robinson:** What do you lose? What do you lose?

**Martin Trow:** Lose an enormous number of things. One of them is as--in a kind of symbolic symbol to the rest of the society, that we are--have a--a still a strong element of merit--meritocratic criteria. Criteria that we're…

**Peter Robinson:** Let me ask Jay just what he thinks is wrong with the SAT.

**Title:** Bias in the Hood
Peter Robinson: Is it your contention that the SAT I test, the so-called aptitude test is in and of itself flawed, inherently flawed, or simply that however good a job it may do in measuring aptitude, it's the wrong criterion for admission or rejection from university?

Jay Rosner: Well I feel both. It's flawed because--on the basis of some research that I've done, SAT questions don't fall from the sky. They're chosen. And it just so happens that nearly every SAT question that's chosen has, in and of itself, a small bias factor producing in a cumulative way, the--the score gaps that we see between Whites and Blacks and Whites and Latinos on the other end. This was the essence of my testimony in the University of Michigan Law School Affirmative Action case. The same process is in operation on the SAT II and on the GRE and on the…

[Talking at same time]

Peter Robinson: For example, it would be impossible to put together a test for administration across the United States of America in French or in Russian. That is to say, there is a certain inbuilt bias in that the questions are in English. Right? You have to understand English but…

[Talking at same time]


Peter Robinson: …so--so--so that's--that--the point I'm trying to make is, you cannot construct a test that doesn't have some sort of cultural bias. All you can do is the best that you can do at correcting these and…

[Talking at same time]

Jay Rosner: Let me finish the…

Peter Robinson: Go ahead.

Jay Rosner: …the answer is no. And let me give the question to you. You have two questions you can choose for the first question on the SAT. One has a fifteen percent gap between Whites and Blacks. Another has a three percent gap between Whites and Blacks. Which one do you choose? The test company chooses the fifteen percent gap question. They choose that. That have that information based on pre-testing.

Peter Robinson: Why do they choose--what's the…

Jay Rosner: Why do they choose that? It's a complicated explanation involving the concept of bi-serial correlation. But let me simplify by saying they want the test to be comparable to last year's test. And last year's test had that same gap. So they must choose the high gap questions.
Peter Robinson: Listen to the *Economist* magazine. This--the *Economist* magazine like every reputable magazine in the world has now written about your University of California in this issue. And the *Economist* says yeah, there's some bias here. The SAT--the--they need to keep working to squeeze out the bias of the SAT I but, quote, "It cannot be entirely coincidental that America's SAT back based universities are the envy of much of the world whereas many of its high schools without any objective national testing are dreadful." So I put it to you again. For its flaws, the SAT does a pretty good job.

M.R.C. Greenwood: Well first of all, that is a magnificently flawed statement. The SAT based universities…

Peter Robinson: SAT backed. Excuse me. I misread it.

M.R.C. Greenwood: …backed universities. I mean, that--I mean, that is--that's pure nonsense. I mean, anybody who knows anything about admission process in any selective university, knows that the SAT is a factor. And it may--as--as--as Martin has said, it may be twenty percent…

[Talking at same time]

Peter Robinson: …universities with--that use the SAT as a factor in admissions are the envy of the world whereas, high schools that have no objective standard are not. Many of them are dreadful. So the SAT does a pretty good job, just objectively. Don't you have to admit a little something?

[Talking at same time]

M.R.C. Greenwood: No, no. I mean, most of the kids in those horrible schools never take the SAT. So there's absolutely no correlation whatsoever between that and the school. I mean, just remember only a percentage of students in this country take the SAT to begin with.

Peter Robinson: What's the percentage?

M.R.C. Greenwood: I think it's eighte--no it's thirty--I just read it. Thirty-four percent.

Peter Robinson: Okay now…

M.R.C. Greenwood: Thirty-four percent...

Jay Rosner: A minority of--of college applicants take it.

[ Talking at same time]

Martin Trow: But very few colleges or universities in the country are at all selective. So most kids who go to college don't need the SAT to get in.
M.R.C. Greenwood: Right, right.

Martin Trow: We're talking about selective institutions. And that…

M.R.C. Greenwood: Yeah.

Martin Trow: …really is important.

M.R.C. Greenwood: And I, you know, I think the argument has really gotten distorted around SAT yes, SAT no. The--the discussion as I understand what President Atkinson is saying and as I hope our faculty will, is we are talking about what are the right admission criteria for the University of California, given our special stature in defining the high school curriculum, given that we do have issues that have to do whether parents and students perceive our admission process as fair.

Peter Robinson: Politics?

Peter Robinson: Let's look at what happened when the University of California banned Affirmative Action in Admissions.

Title: Action Slacks

Peter Robinson: Brief bit of California history, 1995, then Governor Pete Wilson persuades the Regents of the University of California System to abolish Affirmative Action. 1996, California voters approve Proposition 209 which again, abolishes Affirmative Action, not just in the UC system but throughout the state government. 1997, Aff--becomes illegal to use race as a criterion in however small a part for admissions to the University of California system and African-American and Hispanic enrollments in the UC system and they drop especially sharply…

[Talking at same time]

Martin Trow: …wrong on your--on your--on your figures…

Peter Robinson: …they drop especially sharply at Berkeley and UCLA…

Martin Trow: That's the only--about the only place they drop.

[Talking at same time]

Jay Rosner: …and the medical schools.

Martin Trow: Yes…

Peter Robinson: Is that correct? This is crucial. This is critical data. So correct me on this.
Martin Trow: No, there are more minority students in the university system now than there were before…

[Talking at same time]

Peter Robinson: Be careful now. Asians are a different matter.

Martin Trow: No, I'm talking about Blacks and Hispanics.

Peter Robinson: Okay.

Martin Trow: Larger--if ever there was a successful policy change in the University of California, it was the SP one and two which abolished the use of race preference for admission and 209 which backed it up and made it statewide. That--this has been enormously successful on the campus at Berkeley where I--I spend a lot of my time. It is-it is--really the people who come to that institution now of whatever color, know they're there on their own merits. And that's where SAT comes into play because it's not just a question of selectivity. It's a question of legitimating the--making it seem fair and right for parents and kids who apply to believe that they're there on their own--on their own right.

[Talking at same time]

Peter Robinson: So everybody would--all three of you would agree then that this move by Dr. Atkinson, this is not an attempt to get Affirmative Action by the backdoor.

M.R.C. Greenwood: No.

Jay Rosner: I disagree. I think it is an--a move to get…

M.R.C. Greenwood: I don't.

Jay Rosner: …Affirmative Action by the back door even though he--he denies it.

[Talking at same time]

Peter Robinson: You do away with objective standards so that you can…

[Talking at same time]

Peter Robinson: Go ahead. Go ahead.
Jay Rosner: I want to disagree with Martin's statement that it's been a positive for the university. I think it's been a disaster. I look at the medical school admissions for Black students--was our five public UC Medical Schools in '93, '94, admitted forty-seven Blacks, last year, twenty-four Blacks, cut in half. Latino admissions, cut in half to our public medical schools. Our public law schools, Latino and Black admissions down dramatically. So that Martin, while you find perhaps this sense that the students there think they're there on merit, there are lots of students who--lots of minority students who aren't in those institutions, the law schools, the medical schools, Berkeley and UCLA who were--who were successful, who graduated and as a public…

Peter Robinson: Jay.

Jay Rosner: …policy matter…

Peter Robinson: Jay.

Jay Rosner: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Asians constitute twelve percent of the population of California. They constitute thirty-nine percent of the student body of the University of California system as a whole. At UCLA, Asians constitute forty-one percent of the student body. And at UC Berkeley, Asians constitute forty-five percent of the student body. I return to Martin's point. It's not that the SAT is so inherently flawed although we all grant there are some flaws. It's that the educational gaps for Blacks and Hispanics are real and persistent. And Asians who a generation or two ago came to this--and are still coming in large numbers, not knowing the language, very poor, within a generation or two of paying close attention to education, working wi--they are the overwhelming presence at Berkeley and UCLA. The solution is not to attack the SAT I but to improve schooling for--for--for…

[Talking at same time]

M.R.C. Greenwood: No--no one is going to disagree and that certainly includes the president as well as myself that the real solution to California's educational problems is to improve our public schools in particular, but to just generally improve the educational en-vironment. I really do want to say again, that there are many criterion that the University of California could use to admit its students. A consistency in the message that what you take is what we test and that's how you get into the university, has a certain--has a certain appeal in a state where we are dealing with a very diverse group of students. We aren't interested necessarily in what's being taught in the private schools on the East Coast. We are interested in what's being taught in the public schools in the State of California. We are interested in the students and their parents' understanding what to take. We are interested in developing admissions tests that reflects that ability. That may still show substantial differences between different groups of people based on their educational experiences…
Peter Robinson: It'll come--you'll have the same results we've got now.

M.R.C. Greenwood: It could. But now let's--let me just give you another example…

Peter Robinson: What about the charge that universities are more interested in diversity than in intellectual excellence.

Title: Different Strokes

Peter Robinson: The educator, Stephen and Abigail Thurnstrom, I quote, "If forced to choose, today's educational leaders will see creating a certain racial mix on campus as more important than maintaining intellectual standards."

Martin Trow: That exactly why I…

Peter Robinson: Martin Trow has--has--has made a long and distinguished career at the University of California at Berkeley and he said exactly--that's what his response was exactly.

M.R.C. Greenwood: Well I disagree. And, you know, from my perspective as a Chancellor of the University, we are not prostituting our meritocracy to the value of diversity…

Peter Robinson: Let me put it another way, what's wrong with the SAT? And Martin made the point that it's weighted at about 1/5 of--in the basket of…

M.R.C. Greenwood: Well I--I had the privilege of Co-Chairing the National Academy of Science's report on this…

Peter Robinson: That is to say you--you--I'm now trying to put the burden of evidence on you. You have to show positive harm. If it's neutral, we'll keep it just to please Martin. Can you show that the SAT does actual harm?
M.R.C. Greenwood: No, I can't show you that the SAT is doing harm.

Jay Rosner: I can show you that the SAT is doing actual harm…

Peter Robinson: In what way?

Jay Rosner: …cause if I picked--I took five hundred and eighty test questions that the SAT used. I constructed one test and I reduced the test score gap between Whites and Blacks by forty percent. It's all in choosing the questions. This is something no one talks about. It doesn't…

Peter Robinson: It's racist. The bear--the bias is so deeply ingrained in the test you--so you're arguing it's inherently racist?

Jay Rosner: I'm--the--the result…

[Talking at the same time]

Jay Rosner: …the results of the SAT are racist. The intent of the people putting it together is not to reach a racist result. The important point that you raised Peter is that we do have to improve secondary education and primary education. Closing the gaps involves serious work there but the SAT adds to the gap. And that's why…

[Talking at same time]

M.R.C. Greenwood: Let me--let me--let me just say something about the positive harm question. If I could just…


M.R.C. Greenwood: …for one second. I do believe that the SAT does positive harm because people believe that it's biased. And I think you cannot underestimate the impact that that can have on students. And there's a lot of data to show that if students believe--if students believe that something is…

Peter Robinson: M.R.C.…

M.R.C. Greenwood: …that something is biased against them, they tend to react differently.

Peter Robinson: Shelby Steele. Shelby Steele, I think we all know, Shelby Steele Afr--himself an African-American and an educator, dropping the SAT will, quote, "just make the White admissions officer feel good. We," he's referring now to African-Americans, "need the SAT more than anybody else. Without it, we'll have no objective measure. I'll be in favor of dropping the SAT the day the gap between the White and Black SAT scores disappears."
**Martin Trow:** This is my--my colleague, John McWhorter has written a--a wonderful book called, *Losing the Race*, in which he…

**Peter Robinson:** John McWhorter is at the University of California at Berkeley?

**Martin Trow:** Colleague at Berkeley and a book worth reading. And he makes the point that in a way, you touched on. If groups and different backgrounds have difficulty in achieving the--the levels of Whites, you don't change their--the standard. You ask why aren't they achieving the levels of Whites. And finally ways in which they can be made to--and brought to reach the highest levels of whatever they are. Of--of…

**Peter Robinson:** Let's move onto University of California President Atkinson's second proposal.

**Title: The How on Earth Catalog**

**Peter Robinson:** Doctor Atkinson made two proposals. Here's the second. Again, I'm going to quote him, that, quote, "All campuses move away from admission processes that use narrowly defined quantitative formulas and instead adopt procedures that look at students in a comprehensive, holistic way," closed quote. Now University of California system in the year 2000 processed sixty-eight thousand applications for about twenty-eight thousand freshman places. How, M.R.C., can you--can you engage in holistic evaluation of sixty-eight thousand applicants?

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** Well, as a matter of fact, we do a lot more of that than people give us credit for today. And most very selective institutions have been doing it for years. It is more expensive. However, if it is perceived as being a better and fairer way of looking at the students and it gets us a high quality student class which I'm fairly certain…

**Peter Robinson:** Let me tell what'll happen. Far from being perceived as a better or fairer way…

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** It could go the other direction.

**Peter Robinson:** …some--a group of Asian American students who get denied admission to Berkeley or UCLA or Santa Cruz are going to slap you with a--a--a discrimination lawsuit just like that and your holistic methods are going to get pushed by courts right back toward objective…

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** Well I--I--I--I…

**Peter Robinson:** Don't you think?

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** I have news--I have news for you. Any selective institution is going to have unhappy parents and unhappy students. And I'm getting sued is probably a fact of life for most institutions these days. I mean, if two people…
M.R.C. Greenwood: Well if two people come in with essentially the same on paper criteria, you do the best you can to make the--I mean, I think one of the statistics I used to like when I was on the East Coast was that Harvard could fill its entire medical school class with people who have Ph.D.s. They don't want to do that because that would not produce the array of doctors that they want to produce. And…

Jay Rosner: Your use of the word objective. To what are you applying that? The SAT is objective?

Peter Robinson: Well yeah…

Jay Rosner: The SAT is just so not objective in so many ways. Martin talked about before about preparing…

Peter Robinson: We need subjective judgments involved in putting together the test. But if X hundred thousand students take the same test and…

Jay Rosner: If they took the test that I put together, there would be different results. Martin talked about preparing students for this test.

Peter Robinson: Would you be in favor of the SAT if you could put it together?

Jay Rosner: Yes.

Peter Robinson: Did you--did you--did you--well we're halfway there. I'm sure you can agree now. Dr. Atkinson might still have trouble.

M.R.C. Greenwood: No I actually--my position is much clearer in my own mind which is that I feel that in our institution, we…

Peter Robinson: You're not talking about Santa Cruz. You're talking about the whole UC system?

M.R.C. Greenwood: I'm talking about the University of California but I'll speak for Santa Cruz if you'd like. My view is that our responsibility is to have an admission test which reflects what we ask students to study in order to be admitted. I think the SAT was a test for its time. I think it was valuable when Conant was trying to change in which students…

Jay Rosner: …got Midwestern kids into Harvard…


[ Talking at same time ]
M.R.C. Greenwood: But there are times for tests and there are times when the test is wrong.

Martin Trow: There is such a terrible range of quality in the secondary schools that it isn't fair to judge kids solely on the basis of what they were taught in those schools. The SAT, to some degree, rectifies that and gives people some--some bright kids who have been to a miserable school a chance to show an admissions officer what their capabilities are.

[Talking at same time]

Martin Trow: I think there's another question that I--talk about making people unhappy. One of the surely recognized purposes of this is to increase the proportions of the Hispanic and Black kids. I don't think it will in the short-run. And I think that the Hispanic caucus that is looking to these reforms to make a difference will be bitterly disappointed.

M.R.C. Greenwood: I think your confusing the issues. I do not believe that the University of California and the President has promised the changing…

Peter Robinson: President Atkinson.

M.R.C. Greenwood: …President Atkinson has chan--that changing these criterion is going to magnificently alter somebody's view of who gets into the University of California. At least if that's what he's saying, he needs to say that on his own because what I would say is that what we are…

Peter Robinson: He's quite careful not to…

[Talking at same time]

M.R.C. Greenwood: What we're trying to say is understandable criteria that are consistent with the reform of K-12 which we are trying to do and are not going to be shifted by whether or not students can be coached on an exam or whether or not their parents or others can afford to send them to the coaching.

Peter Robinson: Mart--Martin's point is maintain the intellectual standards in this great institution and try to improve the schooling of kids in elementary and junior and high schools. Is that your answer?

Jay Rosner: I agree with the latter point. The former point, maintain standards, meritocracy standards, the SAT. Martin, you talk about them as if they're intertwined. I prepare and have prepared thousands of kids for the SAT. It is a silly undertaking. It does not have intellectual merit and substance. It is game-playing. That's how you increase SAT scores. We have to improve K-12 education. We need not use the SAT as a
mechanism to pick students and when we equate the SAT with merit and with objectivity, that's when we get in trouble.

[Talking at same time]

**Peter Robinson:** Hold on.

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** I just want to make one other point.

**Peter Robinson:** I'm afraid you can't because it's television. I regret--I regret that this is not a seminar at the great University of California at Santa Cruz or at Berkeley. I'm sorry about that but it's television so let me ask one last question of each of you. Three years from now, will the University of California system be using SAT I, the so-called aptitude test in making admissions decisions or will the UC system have abolished the use of the SAT I just as Dr. Atkinson wants? M.R.C.?

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** I think it's probably likely that we will not be using SAT I.

**Jay Rosner:** I say SAT I will go in four to five years, giving me an extra year or two, that we will struggle with the SAT II. We will talk about the problems of the SAT II that you point out and we will engage in a several year experiment to try to figure out if there's an instrument that we can feel good about using. One does not exist right now.

**Peter Robinson:** Will Atkinson have his way, Martin?

**Martin Trow:** No, I think the Academic Senate will wisely reject this idea and it can't happen without their support.

**Peter Robinson:** Wisely, promptly and by an overwhelming margin or will it be a close call…

**Martin Trow:** That…

**Peter Robinson:** …among your colleagues?

**Martin Trow:** …that's harder for me to say. I would guess that it will be substantial recognition that this is a bad idea and also I think the Regents won't like it. I think it will-they're not interested in the loss of the distinction of the University of California as the most--most distinguished public university…

[Talking at same time]

**Peter Robinson:** Martin, M.R.C….

**M.R.C. Greenwood:** I have one last comment. You're going to have to let me…
Peter Robinson: Be fast.

M.R.C. Greenwood: Okay, the diversity of the university has increased and the quality and the ratings of the university has increased enormously so there is absolutely no evidence that anything...

Peter Robinson: These two have happened at the same time.

M.R.C. Greenwood: They have happened at the same time. There is no evidence of degradation of quality that I know of.

Peter Robinson: M.R.C., Martin and Jay, thank you very much.

Jay Rosner: Thank you.

Martin Trow: Thank you.

M.R.C. Greenwood: Great.

Peter Robinson: Dropping the SAT from college admissions would A) increase diversity, B) lower intellectual standards, C) both A and B, D) neither A nor B. Unfortunately, that's one question for which there is no easy answer. I'm Peter Robinson. Thanks for joining us.