

Growing Better Test Takers

BY MARY ANN WILLIS, College Counselor - Bayside Academy, AL

When I started school, in the dark ages, like every other 5 or 6-year-old of my era, I didn't think about standardized tests. I didn't even know what they were. Now there are preschool readiness and admissions tests and big city newspaper articles about test preparation. There is fudging and chicanery involved in getting one's offspring into the right preschool, kindergarten or first grade.

I also didn't know as a six-year-old that I'd be an education lifer. I'm the reluctant teacher—one who serendipitously fell into education and never have, with the possible exception of a glance over my financial shoulder, seriously considered doing anything else.

As far as my students are concerned, I began my career in education in the days of the one-room schoolhouse, the Franklin stove, and an occasional prehistoric animal sighting. I have seen the role of standardized testing in education change. The role of testing in college admissions has changed dramatically. Much to the chagrin of my educational charges, I actually remember taking tests like the PSAT and ACT. I remember taking a placement/entrance test for high school. In truth, my memories of the entrance test are quite vivid. I had been ill when the original test was administered and had to take the make-up test.

There were no traditional counselors in my high school, and the concept of a college counselor/advisor hadn't yet reached my area of the country. The advisors who were assigned to us appeared to be for those with troubles. I never saw one during my first three years of high school. About ready to graduate and making plans for college, I have a foggy recollection of being hauled into an office by a four-foot ten-inch nun whose habit and walk made her appear to roll down the hall as if she was on skates. Her bespectacled penguin-garbed eyes peered at me over her glasses. I can remember her saying, "Your test scores are good—your grades should be better." As a first generation college student, I was clueless about the college admissions process. My mother had insisted on a good high school. Somehow I had taken the right classes and tests. My best friend's dad was a veterinarian, and he took us on a college visit—at a school roughly 1000 miles away. I had no idea why I was going to college or what I wanted to do. I did have a strong academic background and a solid work ethic.

My high school was large enough to have ability groups. In my classes, I was traveling with the braniac set. Sure that there was some error in placement or lapse of judgment on the part of school officials, I plugged along. The goal of the set of students I traveled with was to go to college. I lemminged forward. Going to college fundamentally changed my life and the lives of my children.

As I look back on these experiences, think about what I do daily, and look at my current charges as they face the college admissions juggernaut, I have some thoughts about growing better test takers.

Fear-mongering characterizes today's test prep and admissions worlds. These are businesses where hype makes the nightly news sound bytes and magazine headlines, where reality seldom sees public daylight. Brand names are fine, but this is the land of the educational smorgasbord. Education matters—in terms of economics and in terms of the future of our country. (College Board: professionals.collegeboard.com/data-reports-research/trends/education-pays-2006) On a regular basis, families hear me say: “It isn't about getting in—it's about getting out with a degree, about being able to read, write, think, lead and follow (and know when to do those things). It's about making the most of your talents and skills in and out of the classroom.” Standardized tests have become a part of the admissions labyrinth. NACAC (The National Association for College Admissions Counseling— www.nacacnet.org) studies have shown that the role of test scores at colleges that use them in the admissions process has actually increased in importance as an admissions factor.

Originally the ACT and SAT acronyms stood for something. Now, without any acronym significance, they are known as the high-stakes tests related to college admissions. Almost every college out there will accept either test. Students should take both. Initially, both testing agencies insisted that it was not possible to do short-term preparation for these tests. That was not a sentiment affirmed by the market. The two major test prep companies grossed millions of dollars last year. This doesn't take into account that both ACT and College Board are now in the business of selling test prep materials.

The devil in understanding the role of tests in admissions is always in the details.

For worried parents or frazzled high school students, before you adopt the test stress modus operandi (Terror Every Single Time), let's put a few facts (and coping mechanisms) on the table:

- Check out www.fairtest.org. More than 700 schools—some very competitive ones—no longer use test scores in the admissions process) . . .so breathe.
- Right now, and for the foreseeable future, there are more students in the educational college-going pipeline. More of them are going to college, and they are very smart . . . but demographics show that in several years, the glut of students will subside somewhat.
- A few hours on a test does not equal a demanding four-year high school program—good grades in tough classes are still seen in NACAC college surveys as an important admissions criterion.
- Tests measure certain skills that can be taught.
- Currently, the high-stakes tests are all reading-based.

Reading is free test prep. The more a student reads, the better test-prepared he or she is. Note: A love of reading should start early. It doesn't all have to be Shakespeare and

Plato. It can be *Road and Track*, *Field and Stream*, Tolkien or Rowling. **Regular reading improves comprehension, speed and vocabulary.** These areas are critical to success on standardized tests. There is no test prep fee associated with reading. Library cards are free.

Ensuring that your student has a test prep history that is rational rather than overkill is prudent. Overkill test prep means students are so bored with the test-taking process and the cramming that they are more apt to make pretty patterns on the answer sheets than worry about accuracy. Many applicants at high-powered, highly competitive colleges have strong test scores. And every year, the most competitive of the group announces how many students in the applicant pool with perfect test scores were rejected. Many admitted students at these places do not have perfect test scores. Highly competitive admissions places go far beyond the test score as they evaluate applicants. Admissions at these places is an art—not a science.

Plunging students into the Coliseum Test-Taking School too early or too regularly is almost always a mistake. Most students need training wheels prior to flying off on a two-wheeler. The same is true for test prep. Students need to have experiences in standardized testing that are designed to gradually familiarize them with the tests and maximize results. This not only includes the graduated testing experiences but classroom discussions of test construction, test-taking preparation, and test-taking strategies. Leading a horse to water doesn't guarantee liquid consumption. Exposing students to all of these experiences doesn't guarantee that they get it. It does, however, beat the alternatives.

Education is empowering. It is far more than a test score. It's helpful to remember that as the college admissions wars heat up. Producing better test takers isn't like microwaving a burrito. A long-haul commitment to learning, supplemented with regular reading of quality works, tied with rational test prep experiences and strategies, should produce optimum test results.