

STUDENT INCENTIVES AND THE COLLEGE BOARD SYSTEM

BY ARTHUR G. POWELL

Editor's Note: *For a number of years, AFT has been urging that American schools adopt rigorous external standards in core academic subjects, and curricula and assessments that go along with the standards. We've also emphasized that even these reforms are unlikely to make much difference unless students have strong incentives to work hard to meet the standards.*

Systems of standards and incentives do exist—and spur students on to work and achieve—in many other countries. But most people aren't aware that a comparable but more limited system once existed in this country. In Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep School Tradition, from which the following article is excerpted, Arthur G. Powell tells the story of a home-grown system of external standards and incentives that grew up in college prep schools, or independent schools as they are now usually known, during the early years of the 20th century, and he looks at the powerful impact this system had on how teachers taught and students learned.

A CRUCIAL asset of independent schools over the past century has been the looming omnipresence of college admission as a powerful student and parent incentive. In these schools student willingness to exert mental effort has not required eager youth engaged in academic study for the pleasures it gives; nor has it depended on superb teachers able to stimulate enthusiasm for the life of the mind. Prep schools have had their share of such students and teachers, of course, and always wish for more.

But they also have had many students willing to work, willing to give the material a fighting, grudging



A college preparatory class at St. Albans School, Washington, D.C., in the 1930s.

Courtesy of St. Albans School

chance. One typical senior said that “the future” was the reason he worked hard at his studies. “You know that if you work hard in high school you can get into a good college, and if you do well in college you can go on to a good career. You’re just thinking about your future and you have to work for it. It just doesn’t come.” He never expressed real interest in his studies, only willingness to engage in them and try.

Although students often attribute their motivation to work to parents, peers, and teachers, lurking behind these close-by influences is the concern about college. A junior who thought the college incentive exerted “tons” of influence on him said his parents had been talking about college since freshman year. By sophomore year he was already visiting different schools. “You really start to worry about it.”

The presence of this incentive in institutions defined as college preparatory should not be surprising. What was and is most significant is not the incentive itself, but how it began to be systematically mobilized to promote learning at the beginning of the twentieth century. What parents and students wanted for youth

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after school graduation—acceptance to certain colleges—became specifically contingent on how well they performed while in school. A desired goal for the future was directly linked to school academic performance. Incentives were utilized to create and sustain what were called academic standards.

It took an entirely new voluntary, nongovernmental organization, the College Entrance Examination Board, to organize student incentives as a lever to create and sustain school standards. From 1900, when it was founded, until 1942, the College Board administered a system of essay examinations that tightly linked the decision to admit a student to college with the standard of academic work done in school. A certain level of individual achievement virtually guaranteed admission to the college of one's choice. That tight linkage, rare in 1900 and rare today, was not easily achieved. Schools and colleges had to want it as much as families did—want it enough to cooperate and compromise with one another in ways they had not done before.

On the surface, the College Board was principally a treaty among colleges and between colleges and schools to solve logistical problems of college admission. When a market began to emerge for the modern independent school in the 1800s, many desirable colleges were simultaneously stiffening their entrance requirements. The pace and character of the changes differed according to what each institution aspired to become. But, in most of the better-known private Northeastern colleges, the trend was not only to demand more of students in traditional subjects, but to add requirements in “modern” subjects such as science and history, which began penetrating college curricula in the 1870s.

For tuition-dependent colleges the task was a difficult balancing act. They wished to attract more students just as their curricula began emphasizing the familiar modern subjects rather than religion and the classics. Professors of the newer subjects wished to teach students who had begun studying them while in school. They needed schools to offer those subjects and students to study them. How to get schools to supply both more freshmen and better-prepared freshmen was a vexing problem with several possible answers in the generation after the 1880s.

Most colleges needed live bodies to survive and consequently had virtually no admission requirements. For colleges with the luxury of entrance requirements, the most popular method was admission by certificate. This was a plan by which entire schools were approved or certified in advance by some external body—a state, a state university, a consortium of colleges. Cooperating colleges then agreed to admit any graduate recommended by the certified school.

Other colleges wanted greater control over the quality of entrants' preparation. A few actually established preparatory schools dedicated to meeting their own requirements—Hotchkiss for Yale, Lawrenceville for Princeton. An audacious proposal that Harvard absorb several existing prep schools, creating in effect an integrated K-16 program under one university authority, was seriously put forth.

But the more typical approach of these colleges was to have individual candidates take examinations, in-



College, prep school, and public school teachers gather to read the College Board examinations at Barnard College in 1935.

stead of certifying the schools they attended. This seemed a surer way to guarantee better-trained freshmen and force schools to teach what colleges wanted.

The emerging preparatory schools were strongly influenced both by the preference of their well-off constituencies and by the colleges their graduates wished to attend. In curriculum matters they were clearly dominated by higher education—Harvard's president Charles W. Eliot liked to say that “schools follow universities and will be what universities make them.” But college domination per se was not a major worry for prep schools. They really were, after all, college preparatory. Without that function a major reason for their existence would collapse. It did not occur to them that they would not be dominated in some academic way by higher education.¹

The major strain on school-college relations at the turn of the century was not college domination but the chaos caused by the incredible diversity of college admission and entrance examination requirements. The head of Andover, a relatively large school that sent graduates to many colleges, complained in 1885 that “out of over forty boys preparing for college next year, we have more than twenty Senior classes.” Unreasonable diversity in admissions requirements inconvenienced not just universities wishing to increase enrollments and raise entrance standards, but also and es-



Courtesy of Educational Testing Service

requirements.”³

Four closely related characteristics account for the system’s relative success in promoting hard academic work among often reluctant youth. All have close parallels with contemporary efforts to stimulate incentives and raise standards. First, the system developed and sustained a rough consensus about the content of academic standards—what college-bound students should know and be able to do. Second, it converted these standards into credible examinations with predictable consequences for individual students. Third, the standards and examinations directly influenced school curriculum, teaching, hiring practices, and professional development. Finally, the system fully understood its responsibility to deal with students of very diverse academic abilities. Its job was to prepare as many students as possible to undertake college work, not to select out the brightest among them.

Standards as Curricular Frameworks

Professor Carl Brigham of Princeton, a wise longtime observer of the College Board and principal creator of the SAT, admitted without apology in 1933 that the Board’s major function was as an “institutional control.” It controlled participating schools by the academic standards on which its yearly examinations were based. These standards were annually published descriptions of the essential concepts and themes in each of the fields where the Board examined. Called *Definition of the Requirements* for most of the 1900–41 period, they spelled out in greater or lesser detail, according to the subject or moment in time, what students should know and be able to do. Brigham described the *Definition* in 1934 as a “framework” in order to distinguish broad domains of knowledge from specific examination questions.⁴

Decades later one is struck by two aspects of the annual definition of subject requirements. They were quite ambitious educationally, considering the varied academic population they were intended to affect. They also embodied broad consensus among creators and users about the general nature, if not the particulars, of what academic standards should mean. The Board exerted a clear influence because it was a voluntary association run and used by people with roughly similar views and interests. Both aspects of the annual *Definition*—ambition and consensus—had similar sources.

There was general consensus behind what high standards meant because the individuals who established them shared many values about the primacy of academic education organized by the disciplines. These individuals were drawn primarily from higher education and particularly from various commissions of national scholarly associations. They included many of the most famous scholars of their day. In spite of disagreements about what was most important to learn within their fields, they shared a general ideal that high educational standards and high academic standards were one and the same. The College Board did not have to debate whether the disciplines should be the centerpiece of middle school and secondary education. Independent-school people generally as-

pecially the prep schools. So it was no surprise that a new agency, the College Entrance Examination Board, was created by the universities with representation from the schools. It prepared syllabi defining the content of major secondary subject areas and annual examinations based on the syllabi.

For four decades after 1900, the College Board did far more than just standardize admissions examinations among a small number of well-known colleges. It organized an intricate and coherent system of academic incentives to support serious academic standards. The system linked what students wanted—admission to the college of their choice—with what they had to do to get it, pass College Board examinations. The Board also organized school practice so students would perform well enough to demonstrate that their schools were effective and their standards sufficiently high. The Board pushed students to work hard and schools to do the same.²

Years later a veteran schoolman summarized the system’s workings. Parents sought out an independent preparatory school “to do a specific and limited job—the necessary intensive preparations of the student for the rigorous College Board examinations.” Prep schools occupied “a peculiar middle-man position in a process that was generally binding as long as the colleges and universities kept to their high academic standards and required for entrance success in these College Boards.” The “selling point” of independent education was a “virtual guarantee to place the young student in any college or university, however difficult the

sented. A headmaster believed it was self-evident that the quality of a person's mind was determined by the kind of material he or she directed toward it. "If he confines his reading to trash, he will be a trivial person."⁵

But prep schools were not evangelists promoting the cause of serious academic work for all American youth. They were not (nor are they now) reformers seeking converts. If anything, they tended to promote themselves as the last refuge against educational barbarism. "We hold that every idea must be made as interesting as possible," one prep school advocate submitted, "but we refuse to water down its essence for the pseudo-democracy of leveling and mediocrity."⁶

The idea of high academic standards took on an exclusionary and old-fashioned tinge when the truth was almost the opposite. In fact, the College Board exams held a varied academic population accountable to serious and similar demands. The academic standards represented by each *Definition* were a triumphant victory of modern subjects—history, English, science, modern languages—over the traditional domination of the classics and formal mathematics. They were a victory for progressive and democratic forces, not for forces of reaction and exclusivity.

Curricular wars were fought within virtually all the disciplines. They ranged from the importance to be given this or that topic to the balance between mandated coverage and teacher freedom. In English, for example, the *Definition* gradually moved toward less prescription of content. The early English *Definition* specified one list of books about which students were to know "the most important parts" (for example, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Last of the Mohicans*). It also specified another list they had to know in much greater detail (for example, *Macbeth* and Burke's speech *Conciliation with America*). But by the end of the 1920s a Board Commission on English won a less-restrictive conception. The English *Definition* for 1934 had no required books and a simplified overview: "The requirement in English is designed to develop in the student (1) the ability to read with understanding, (2) knowledge and judgment of literature, and (3) accurate thinking and power in oral and written expression."

Those involved furiously debated whether or not the changes lowered or raised standards, but the debate occurred within a context of basic agreement. The new "suggested" six-page reading list included fourteen Shakespeare, eight Shaw, and two O'Neill plays, four Conrad novels, and contemporary poets such as Frost and Yeats. Teachers were advised that the composition tasks would "assume continuous and thorough training in mechanics." The *Definition* specified that this training implied "mastery" of such matters as grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary and "a command of varied and flexible sentence forms." The instruction required to produce such mastery, teachers were told, "necessitates constant and painstaking practice by the candidate in criticism and revision of his own written work." In such ways as this, subject by subject, the Board defined and refined what it meant by academic standards.⁷

The College Boards

The College Board examinations were created by committees of "examiners" with substantial private school representation. They were largely of the essay variety and usually three hours in length. The College Boards converted *Definition* standards into concrete tasks that defined how student performance would be demonstrated. They also extended the notion of standards to define what levels of performance were considered outstanding and minimally acceptable. The exams were administered nationwide in test centers during one hectic week each June. By 1940, more than 37,000 June examinations were taken in thirty-six subjects at 318 test centers.

The examinations were not only created outside individual schools; they were scored outside schools by teachers and professors who did not know the students whose work they evaluated. External assessment was done by hundreds of "readers" assembled at Columbia University during a week soon after the tests were given.

The examinations were graded against a single standard or criterion determined by the readers rather than compared against each other. A later, test-savvy generation would call the Board's assessment method "criterion-referenced."⁸

Annual academic essay examinations produced and assessed outside schools were common in Europe but almost unique in America. They profoundly affected participating schools, mostly for the better. Frank Ashburn of Brooks School called the Board's exams the prep schools' "staunchest ally" in standard-setting. He believed that they "probably did more than any other single factor to emphasize the value of good teaching." Wilson Farrand, a College Board leader since 1900 and headmaster of Newark Academy in New Jersey, thought the Boards were strongest where most American high schools were weakest. They provided standards of "thoroughness and genuine mastery of the subjects taught" instead of "sloppiness and superficiality."

The exams promoted thoroughness and mastery in part because they created incentives and standards for teachers. Their external creation and assessment introduced an outside judgment about teachers' performance as well as students' performance. The chairman of the Secondary Education Board (SEB) praised the College Board in 1936 for its "guiding and standardizing and controlling effect on school curricula and teaching." He did not fear a loss of teacher or school autonomy, but welcomed the stimulation of external accountability.⁹

The headmaster of Baltimore's Gilman School regarded the College Board as a "measuring stick" against which he could raise the educational standards of his school. They made it possible to "use continuing poor averages in any particular subject as a whip on masters who taught the subject." Teachers predictably responded by developing extensive practice or coaching sessions in which examinations from previous years were carefully reviewed. The "almost airtight system" developed to make Gilman boys study served its purpose well in the judgment of the school's historian. It raised educational standards from the level of "aver-



Students at Rosemary Hall, Greenwich, Connecticut, in a college preparatory class. They are wearing their spring uniform of gingham dresses, navy blazers with red trim, white socks, and saddle shoes.

age good schools to the level of the highest in the country."¹⁰

The thoroughness and mastery produced by the College Boards also exposed a classic tension about standards. On the one hand, the examination often encouraged memorization and cramming. Topics and sometimes questions were repeated from year to year. They could to some extent be studied for in advance. Sometimes knowledge alone could get students through without the need to demonstrate much analytical capacity of the sort a later generation would call "higher-order thinking." To some this was a weakness.

On the other hand, the examinations improved academic achievement. Many students needed a practical incentive to work hard. The link between the Boards and college admission provided that incentive. In 1932 the headmaster of St. Paul Academy in Minnesota believed that the exams made lazy privileged boys work hard for the first time because they had to. The mental exertion required was regarded as a good thing in itself—an outcome schools valued as a worthy lifetime habit quite aside from whatever momentary academic achievement it produced. In particular, the examinations could be attempted by students with limited academic skills for whom "uphill thinking is the best way to think." They enabled "hard and specific work" to

pay off.

Furthermore, prep school proponents emphasized that the examinations, like the *Definition*, were constantly improving in quality. Standards were becoming more ambitious. Gilman's founding headmaster vigorously denied in 1932 that they could be passed by candidates who had "only facts in their possession and no knowledge of their meaning nor power to think." On the contrary, the Boards were "tests of power which require a knowledge of facts." Power to think required knowledge. The head of Detroit Country Day School believed that the English examination had become "a test of creativeness and appreciation."

The last three-hour English essay examination ever given by the Board, based on the revised English *Definition*, lends backing to this assertion. In June 1941, one of four questions asked students to read W. B. Yeats's poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." They had to respond to eight different assertions about the poem and would be graded on understanding the poem, accuracy in writing, and clarity in writing. Forty minutes. The question combined a concern for standards, for differences among the students, and for sensitivity to the real-world times in which they lived.¹¹

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Teachers and Professional Development

The examination pressed teachers to perform to an outside common standard. The system clearly opposed the idea that teachers could or should define their fields as they wished. Instead, they taught to their predictions and hopes about how the next examinations might resemble those of prior years.

But there were compensations for teachers who saw their classroom freedom somewhat eroded. One was that externally set and scored examinations tended to make students and teachers allies rather than adversaries. Instead of grading final exams, teachers crossed their fingers and rooted for everyone. The objective was to move all students forward, not to stress differences in attainment. Gilman's historian concluded, "If

everyone passed ... the master was considered to have done a fine job."¹²

Another compensation was that thousands of the small cohort of private school teachers were not just passive recipients of College Board commands but active participants in the grand enterprise of creating and grading the examinations. This was surely one of the most powerful professional development experiences in American educational history. It was task oriented, deadly serious, and enormous fun. Teachers and heads welcomed the close ties that entrance examinations promoted with well-known colleges. They enjoyed the sense that in some respects they were all part of the same cause, profession, system—that the boundaries between good secondary schools and good colleges were permeable and not divided by high walls of differing status. This gave them a feeling of membership in a large and respected professional community—a feeling of dignity denied many American teachers.

The huge June gathering resembled an "educational congress." Between 1900 and 1941, it was perhaps the largest regular occasion at which high school and college teachers struggled together at a common task and from which teachers brought back to their schools helpful criticisms and broader points of view. The College Board believed that the annual reading session "helped immeasurably in upholding standards," but perhaps more important was the collegiality, stimulation, and prestige it gave to participating teachers.

Readership was a professional plum, readers hated to rotate off, and public school teachers resented private school dominance. (A practical problem was that many public schools were still in session when the examinations were read.) Their protests led to a 1934 College Board decision to change the reader ratio toward a goal of 4:3:2 among colleges, private schools, and public schools. Yet in 1941 more than 42 percent of readers were still drawn from independent schools. To the end, readership remained largely a private school privilege.

Student Variety

Before the 1950s, few students gained admission to prep schools on the grounds of special academic promise or aptitude. Committed to preparing most of their students for colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, the schools contained a mix of the academically gifted, the average, and the truly slow. They enrolled far more scholastic diversity in the first part of the century than they do today. Some students were enrolled literally at birth, when gender was the only selective factor. Years later McGeorge Bundy recalled his schooldays at Groton in the 1930s. "If you weren't a notorious and incorrigibly stupid or lazy person you could go to any college you wanted. You really could."

All this was accepted at the time as simply the way things were. Prep schools catered to an economic class, not to an academic class. They routinely assumed that public high school graduates who attended prestigious colleges were, on the whole, more able and motivated than their own students. Frederick Winsor, Gilman's founding head and later the founding head of Middlesex School near Boston, told a Harvard alumni

meeting in 1930 that the job of private schools was to "give an education to all the sons of such men as you, if you want to send them to us, not to a selected few of your sons." It was not the "bright boy who specially needs the best and wisest of handling," Winsor went on, "but the boys below the average in intelligence." He assured the sympathetic crowd that true leadership in later life depended less on brainpower than on "determination and fight and character."¹³

Most independent-school commentators followed Winsor's reasoning. Their institutions should be broadly accessible to those who could pay. Being bright conveyed no special cachet. Some independent-school leaders trumpeted the "true talent of the slow, cautious, and searching mind" or unfavorably compared the "facile, lazy student as against the hard-working slower student." Slower students might not excel at their studies or care much about them, but they would often exert considerable leadership in extracurricular and social activities in school and college. The prep schools were undefensive about the academic quality of their student bodies. Their students could usually enter any college they wished if they worked hard.¹⁴

This was one of the most significant assets of the College Board system. Its essay examinations were not designed to be impossibly difficult. The examination game could be played for genuinely "high stakes" without seeming to be beyond the power of diligent students to control. The idea was not to keep students out of college but to ensure that they know enough to stay in.

The College Board essay examinations, though regarded as more rigorous than the written examinations of individual colleges that had preceded them, were constructed with a broad student-ability range in mind. They attempted to pull everyone up to a minimum standard in the possession of knowledge and the capacity to use it. Until the late 1930s, few influential educators—and extremely few school people—cared about winnowing the brightest students from the merely proficient ones. Harvard's President Conant defended the essay exams as "particularly necessary" for students "of somewhat less than the highest" academic ability.

Of course there were limits to what could be accomplished when academic raw material was extremely weak. The secretary of the College Board lamented in 1919 that some students with abominable Board scores aspired to college only for social advantages and should not be encouraged to advance beyond high school. The most thorough survey of boarding schools of its time found large differences in the average age of graduating seniors in 1921 at certain boarding schools compared with the Cleveland, Ohio, public high schools. Cleveland's average graduating age of 17.1 years contrasted with Lawrenceville School's average of 18.7. The reason for so many "over-age" private school seniors was parental desire that children with limited academic capacity attempt the Boards just one more time. Older students got better scores. If they passed, tutoring schools in towns like Cambridge and New Haven were ready to assist them with the greater rigors of college work.

A private school research group sardonically concluded in 1933 that the "non-academic pupil" had been an issue for years but that research had been deferred

because "just now many schools are engaged in laboratory experience with that very problem, after which a thorough study will have a better point of departure." Despite these concerns about the limits of educability, what was most significant about the relation between the College Board system and student aptitude was the expectation that a wide variety of aptitudes could succeed on a serious academic examination if the stakes were high and the preparation specific.¹⁵

IN 1942 important elements of the College Board system were dropped. The old system ceased to exist when top colleges became more concerned with the raw ability of prospective students than with the quality of their previous education. Some aspects were restored in altered form during the 1950s as the Advanced Placement Program. AP courses survive as the best systemic example of incentive-driven, externally assessed standard-setting in American education.

But the earlier, more elaborate system has been largely forgotten or stereotyped. This is unfortunate even though many of its procedures were primitive first steps. We should not remember the old system to repeat it or to make excessive claims for its effectiveness. Nonetheless, it contained several provocative features of great interest to anyone concerned with student incentives, academic standards, and assessment.

The old College Board system was voluntary and nongovernmental. Certain schools and colleges had particular problems that could be solved by inventing a new collaborative regulatory body. The new system was remarkably broad-based and democratic regarding student aptitude. The presumption was that varied student abilities could rise to meet the same standard, although it would be easier for some and harder for others. The system rested on a consensus that valued high academic standards and assumed that this consensus existed within an educational culture broader than that of individual schools. It was legitimate, given this consensus, to use external assessment to press both teachers and students to work harder than they otherwise would have done.

These features gave prep schools considerable educational advantages. They indicated systemic support for student incentives to learn. Privileged students became doubly privileged. Even if they were lazy and average, they were part of a system that forced them to work. This is a bitter irony. American schooling gave educational incentives to students who already were its most privileged, but few similar incentives to anyone else. □

Endnotes

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⁵ Thomas S. Fiske, *Twenty Seventh Annual Report of the Secretary* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1927), p. 1; Allan V. Heely, *Why the Private School?* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 105.

⁶ Richard M. Gummere, "Twenty Years Onward, or the Next Two Decades in Secondary Education," *SEBAR 1940*, pp. 12, 6; Claude M. Fuess, "Free Enterprise in Education," speech to the Association of Independent Schools of Greater Washington, D.C., October 21, 1952, p. 9, NAISA; Arthur S. Roberts, "Report of the Chairman of the Executive Committee, March 8, 1947," *SEBAR 1946*, pp. 28-29.

⁷ *Definition of the Requirements, Edition of December 1934* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1934), pp. 7-14, College Board Archives.

⁸ Nicholas Murray Butler, *First Annual Report of the Secretary, College Entrance Examination Board of the Middle States and Maryland* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1901), p. 20.

⁹ Ashburn is quoted in *NCR 5* (December 1947): 3. Farrand is quoted in Fuess, *The College Board*, p. 68; E.J.V. Hancox, "Report of the Chairman of the Executive Committee, February 15, 1936," *SEBAR 1935*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Bradford McE. Jacobs, *Gilman Walls Will Echo: The Story of the Gilman Country School 1897-1947* (Baltimore: Gilman Country School, 1947), pp. 59-61.

¹¹ Arthur S. Roberts, "Report of the Chairman," March 8, 1947, p. 28; Richard M. Gummere, "Twenty Years Onward," p. 12. See also W.S. Litterick, "The Faith We Live By," *ISB* (May 1947): 22; J. DeQ. Briggs, "Letter to Editor," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin 34* (February 19, 1932): 620; Frederick Winsor, "Letter to Editor," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin 34* (February 19, 1932): 619; F. A. Shaw, "Letter to Editor," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin 34* (February 19, 1932): 620; *English Examination, June 16, 1941* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1941), pp. 29-30, College Board Archives.

¹² Jacobs, *Gilman*, p. 60.

¹³ McGeorge Bundy, quoted in "The American Dream at Groton," public television documentary, October 1988; Wayne E. Davis, "Editorial," *Private School News 6* (June 1930), p. 4; Frederick Winsor, "Is Harvard Too Hard on the Undergraduates?" *Private School News 7* (November 25, 1930), p. 5.

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