ETS: the silent ogre in American education

By JOHN DURHAM
Such noted commentators and critics as Jacques Barzun, Clark Kerr, and Paul Goodman have made frequent attempts to isolate and analyze various conditions and trends in American higher education. They speak of publish or perish, academic freedom, teaching machines, “free universities,” and “multiversities.” But they, and hosts of others, have virtually ignored a force which is subtly, yet radically, altering the course of American Colleges, high schools, and students. This is the Educational Testing Service. Headquartered in Princeton, New Jersey, the ETS silently molds opinions and futures, determines policies and programs to a frightening degree.

Promulgator of such multifarious products as SAT’s, GRE’s, Law Boards, Medical School Admission Tests, National Teacher’s Exams, and IBM—knows what else, ETS holds in its multiple-choiced hands an incredible and awesome ability to determine the educational future of millions of high school and college graduates.

California Rebels
From the Ivy League to Stanford, from Chicago to UT to Rice, university catalogues inform prospective undergraduate and graduate students that the criteria for admission will be some combination of academic record, letters of recommendation, and scores on some set of nation-wide, ETS-administered tests (please have two copies of your test scores sent to the Admission Office immediately). The only major educational institution to decide that they are more competent than a computer to decide on the qualifications of admission candidates is, strangely enough, the gargantuan University of California system.

ETS claims that its results provide a standard method of evaluation for students from different schools and different parts of the country. They go further to say that students who do best on their exams will wind up with the best academic records—implying that to ignore College Boards or Graduate Records is to invite disaster in the form of admitting students whose qualifications are somehow incomplete and who are very likely to perform poorly once admitted.

Measuring Aptitude Well and good. Certainly some method of comparing applicants from different areas is needed. And certainly no university wants to admit students who will not do well. But we seriously question the ability of ETS products to accomplish these tasks successfully. And the side effects of the heavy weight given the test scores by admission directors are both unfortunate and undesirable.

The aptitude sections of both the College Boards and Graduate Records are blatantly misconceived and mis-named. The concept that any kind of a multiple-choice test could provide an accurate indication of an individual’s aptitude in any area strains the imagination. Several college seniors majoring in either mathematics or engineering have told us that the GRE math aptitude test covers not so much aptitude as it does trickery.

“Guessing Record Exams” Likewise, a college senior who is undecided between graduate school and law school faces two days of what one student aptly termed “Guessing Record Exams.”

Curbing the power and influence of ETS is vitally necessary if the individual is to retain any semblance of importance in American higher education. At best the tests provide a convenience for admissions directors. At worst they assume a mystical, god-like authority over the aspirations of American students—capable in one three-hour session of enhancing or destroying the future of an individual at his chosen institution.

The University of California has rebelled against the dictators of the Educational Testing Service. Their example deserves emulation.