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Selection, Exams, and Stress: A Comparative Study

Standardized testing has long been a means to measure the abilities of students. France and the United States both have exams that are required for college/university entrance. Although these tests are comparable in many ways, they also contain differences that may very well affect the stress level of those students taking the test. It is obvious though that students in both countries suffer a severe amount of stress due to the high stakes that are placed on these tests. Many students and parents believe that their test results will have a significant impact on their future. So the questions arise, how do we know when students are suffering from too much stress, and if they are, what alternatives are there to standardized tests as a way for universities to evaluate student skills? The following essay describes the standardized testing systems in the United States and France, and explores the opinions of students and parents over stress due to test taking along with some teacher and counselor views over the two systems and their effect on students.

There are three significant high school tests in the United States that are considered “high stakes testing”. These are the SAT, ACT, and AP tests. The SAT is composed of ten tests: three reading comprehension, three math, three writing, and one variable. The reading, math, and writing each last a total of seventy minutes and the variable lasts twenty-five minutes. The reading sections consist of short passages followed by questions over the passages (all multiple choice), the math is made up of algebra, geometry, and algebra II (multiple choice and open ended), and the writing contains grammar, vocabulary, and an essay (multiple choice and essay). The variable can be any of these subjects and is used for research only. The three subjects are scored on a scale of 800 for a total composite score out of 2400. The SAT allows students more time than does the ACT, and 80% of students complete all of the questions. The average student answers 50% to 60% of these questions correctly (“College Board”; *SAT Data Tables*). With percentages this small, it is no surprise students stress out over these tests, as they find them incredibly difficult. The majority of students are likely to be frustrated if they can only correctly answer one-half of the questions. In 2011, 1,647,123 seniors took the SAT (“College Board”; *SAT Data Tables*). Some universities also require SAT subject tests which are an hour long and cover more specific topics, ranging from biology to United States history. In 2011, 500,000 seniors took one or more SAT subject tests (“College Board”; *SAT Data Tables*).

The ACT is similar to the SAT in that it is a standardized college entrance exam that covers a wide array of subjects to determine students’ general knowledge. The ACT contains four subjects, which are reading comprehension, math, English, and science. There is also an optional writing portion. The reading section is very similar to the SAT and contains 40 questions with a 35 minute time limit. ACT Math also contains the same math subjects as the SAT, but the 60 questions are straight forward and involve less critical thinking. It has a one hour time limit. The English component tests only grammar skills, and is 75 questions with a 45 minute time limit. Science is the significant difference in the two tests, and usually helps the students decide whether the SAT or ACT is a better fit. No outside knowledge is required (although it helps) as its purpose is to test analytical thinking. The science test is 40 questions, but only 35 minutes is allowed for completion. The writing section is a short argumentative essay to be written in 35 minutes over a specified prompt. The ACT is scored on a scale from one to 36. Each of the four subjects is scored on this scale, and then averaged for a composite score. The writing is scored on a scale of one to twelve. The significant difficulty on the ACT is the strict time constraints. A vast majority of students do not finish all of the questions on the test. In 2011, 1,623,112 students took the ACT. Fewer than one tenth of one percent of those students received a 36. Only 25% met the college readiness benchmark in all four areas which predicts a 50% chance of a B or higher and a 75% chance of a C or higher in college (“National Score Trends”). Again, these statics display a significant challenge that students must overcome on these tests to feel confident in their ability to perform well in college.

AP tests are different from the SAT and ACT in that they specifically test students over material studied in class; they are not required for admittance to a university. Most students take an AP class and then take the AP test at the end of the year, although the class is not required. There are 33 AP tests and the majority of them have a multiple choice section that lasts from one to one and one-half hours, and an open ended or essay section that lasts from one and one-half to two hours. Typically, the open ended problems are on the math and science tests while English and history/government tests consist of essay questions. There are some exceptions, such as the foreign language tests, which have an oral component and the studio art tests which are graded based on a portfolio that the student works on throughout the year. These tests are graded on a scale of one to five. Depending on the college or university, scores of three, four, or five will count toward a credit in that subject in college. The more highly ranked universities tend to accept only certain tests with fours or fives. In May 2011, 1,973,545 students took one or more AP tests. Many of them took more than one because there were 3,456,020 tests taken (“College Board”; *Summary Reports*).

What is it that makes these tests so stressful? Most colleges and universities require the ACT and SAT for admittance, and most state and private four year institutions requiring at least a 24 on the ACT and a 1600 on the SAT. Nationally ranked colleges and universities do not have a minimum score requirement, but often do not even consider students who do not have at least a 30 on their ACT or a 2000 on the SAT. These numbers are extremely intimidating when looked at in comparison with the average SAT and ACT scores at top colleges. Duke’s middle 50% of students have a 1990 to 2290 on their SAT and Emory’s has a 1950 to 2200 (Nicole). They ivy league schools tend to be even more intimidating with Harvard’s middle 50% scores on the ACT ranging from a 31 to a 35 and Yale’s from a 32 to a 35 (Grove). These schools also expect to see applicants who have taken multiple AP tests and scored fours and fives. Yet, the average AP scores on the 33 different tests are a 2.86 (“College Board”; *Summary Reports*). The national average on the ACT test is a 21.1 and the SAT critical reading is a 497 and the math is a 514 (“National Score Trends”)(“College Board”; *Summary Reports*). These scores make it evident that over half of the kids that take the tests do not meet college standards. What is the typical reaction of a student realizing their performance is not good enough? It is likely that of frustration and disappointment. This leads to the growing trend of students taking tests multiple times to meet the mark of what colleges and universities deem successful or “good enough”.

The French system’s standardized testing mostly centers on the baccalaureate, commonly referred to as the bac. This test is a college entrance exam as well as a high school diploma, which makes it significantly different from the SAT and ACT. The test is based off of the course work that the student chooses to do in school, unlike the SAT and ACT which are not created off of the high school’s curriculum. Also, instead of being offered once every other month, the bac is taken throughout one week in June after a student’s year in terminale. Although, there are a few parts of the bac that are to be taken at the end of premier. The set up of the baccalaureate general depends on the student’s choice of section during their year in premier. There are three options: natural sciences, economics and social sciences, and literature. Generally, the tests require students to write a multi-paged, well-argued paper. The math and science tests contain open ended problems sets and there is no multiple choice. This is significantly different than American tests of which the majority are multiple choice. The foreign language tests require translation and sometimes have an oral component. Another significant difference is that students can also perform a research projects as part of their bac. This is called “travaux personnels encadres” or “TPE”. Students get into groups of two, three or four and focus on a subject chosen by them and overseen by a faculty member. For example, two students, Leo and Gaby, were putting together a video where they went door to door asking people what they thought about globalization. This was relevant to their section because both are in the economics and social sciences section.

The bac for each of the three sections is composed of multiple test that are eventually scored on a scale from one to twenty. The natural sciences section (S) requires students to take a test over biology, engineering, or earth and life sciences, physics and chemistry, math, history and geography, a first and second foreign language, and philosophy. The science tests are composed of a written and laboratory portion and the other tests are all written. In premier, students must take the French language and literature tests which involve written and oral components. The economics and social sciences section is composed of history and geography, math, economics and social sciences, first and second foreign language, and philosophy. All are written except the second foreign language is oral. They are required to take the French language and literature tests in premier and also the earth and life sciences test. Finally, literature is made up of philosophy, literature, history and geography, and a first and second foreign language. These tests are all written. Again, they must take the French tests in premier along with the natural sciences and computer science. These tests take about 17 to 23 hours total. The students receive their scores a week after the completion of their exam (as compared to the three weeks for the ACT and SAT to be returned and the two and a half months for AP tests) and those students scoring below a ten do not pass. If they have scored an eight to a ten, they can take two exams of their choosing in an oral format. If these scores bring their average up to a ten, then they pass. If they do not, they must repeat terminale and can only do so five times until they must wait ten years to take it again. The different parts of the test have different coefficients. The tests that are more relevant to their section are more heavily weighted. Those students receiving a 12 to a 13.99 receive “mention assez bien” honors, a 14 to 15.99 is “mention bien” (high honors) and a 16 and above is “tres bien” (highest honors).

Pass rates for the bac are typically high. The 2007 to 2008 class had a pass rate of 83.3% which increased to 88.8% for the 2009-2010 class (“Education in France”). Over 300,000 students passed the baccalaureate general of the 65% of school pupils that took it (“French Lycee Baccalaureate Results”). Some students go on to “classes preparatoires,” to which they must seek admission to prepare them for the “grandes ecoles”. This process takes place months before the exam and so does not depend on the scores on the bac. Only 5% of students attend the grandes ecoles, which are incredibly prestigious (“Education in France”). This tiny percentage is terribly threatening to many students who have aspirations of attending a grand ecole.

Students, parents and faculty have all argued that testing is being overemphasized and does not properly display students’ strengths. The voices for this complaint are louder in the United States where the SAT and ACT have even less to do with course material the students have studied and more to do with test taking strategies and understanding the test itself. The complaint is that it doesn’t measure students’ intellect, but rather how well they can take a test. This is still a problem in France, but is not as prevalent as the students in France have a choice of what test to take (S, ES, or L) and can show that intellect through written essays instead of solely through filling in bubbles. But, some people in France argue that even these three sections do not present students with enough options because students have other talents that do not fall into these categories. It is alarming how higher education relies so heavily on a number-just one test score, but it is also necessary to have so form of standardization to evaluate a massive number of students’ abilities on a level playing field.

Statistics gathered through random surveys in the U.S. and then France provide some evidence of student and parent opinions as to standardized test taking, the stress it causes, and the impact they believe it could have on their futures. These statistics can also provide a comparison of the views of American and French students. The first significant difference in American and French student responses to the surveys is the number of tests they have taken and/or plan to take, which is of course due to the different testing systems. Seventy-six percent of American students said they will take 3 or more standardized tests (including SAT, ACT and AP) before they graduate, whereas 59% of French students said they would take one test, 26% said they would take two, and 15% said they would take three. Forty-two percent of French students claimed that on average they spend more than six hours a month studying for standardized tests while only 12% of American students said the same. This may be attributed to the fact that the French tests are specifically based on subjects students take in schools, while American tests are meant to test general knowledge and test taking abilities. When asked if their results were typically at, above, or below their expected score, 56% of French students said at, 7% said above, and a surprising 37% said below. Yet 76% of American students said at, 15% said above, and only 9% said below. The grading system in France could be more difficult, or it is also possible that American students’ ability to take the test multiple times mean they can slowly increase their scores and so they can set small goals.

In the surveys, students were asked what kind of symptoms they have experienced due to the pressures of testing. The results were: 25% of French and 52% of American students said they struggled with sleeplessness; 75% and 33% said they suffered from fatigue; 7% and 12% said they suffered depression; 24% and 15% said they had anxiety attacks; 19% and 12% said they had habits of over-eating; 18% and 15% have a loss of appetite; 40% and 48% suffer from headaches; 6% and 9% have digestive problems; 40% and 42% bite their nails; 19% and 27% have skin problems; 29% and 15% develop strained relationships with friends and family; 31% and 33% become easily impatient; 9% and 12% have nightmares; 9% each become apathetic; 29% and 36% suffer from a lack of concentration; 4% and 9% have trouble breathing; 19% and 15% cry; 7% and 3% develop obsessive behaviors; 19% and 15% have bouts of anger; 34% and 9% show aggression; 19% and 3% tremble; 13% and 18% twitch; and 24% and 27% become disorganized. All of these symptoms reveal kids acute suffering due to the stresses of testing. Furthermore, 22% of French students and 55% of American students said that the pressure of testing had driven them to feel the necessity to cheat.

Students were asked to either “agree” or “disagree” with additional questions. When asked if they felt stressed the night before an exam, 87% of French students agreed and 90% of American students agreed. Ninety-four percent of French students said their parents pressure them to perform well on tests and 87% of American students said the same. Eighty-two percent of French students and 87% of American students said they pressured themselves to do well. A two proportion hypothesis test also proves that there is no significant difference between these two proportions, so it can be assumed that the pressure the two groups of students put on themselves is comparable. The percent of French and American students worried over the impact testing will have on their futures is 82% and 63%. The percent of French and American students who feel the need to study before an exam is 91% and 85%. Sixty-nine percent of French students said that their parents encourage them to study more than they do and 91% of American students said the same. Sixty-eight percent of French students said they have had to sacrifice extracurricular activities because of testing and 66% of American students said the same. When asked if they had ever consulted a doctor due to stress, 19% of French students agreed and 15% of American students agreed. When asked if they wanted to attend a university, 54% of French students agreed and 94% of American students agreed. This difference is explained by some French students’ desire to attend a “grand ecole” which is not considered a university, while the prestigious American schools also fall under the category of university of college. To explain this, 68% of French students said they wanted to attend a grand ecole. Ninety-six percent of French students believe that testing results will affect their future, while 87% of American students believed the same. When asked whether they thought that testing was becoming more of a determinate role in their lives, 96% of French students and 97% of American students agreed. With such large number of students holding the belief that testing will affect their future and that its importance is increasing, it is no wonder that students are stressed over exams.

When asked to explain why testing was so important, the vast majority of students responded that it was to find a job that would make them happy, such as this student who said, “Cela permet de pouvoir faire plus tard un métier qui nous plaira” and the student who said, “Permet de trouver un travail qui nous plait”. Most of the surveys had something similar written as the explanation, although some had a more dim view of the testing process such as the student who said, “Car c’est important et on n’a pas le choix”. This emphasizes the way in which parents, teachers, schools, and media have enforced the importance of testing and the necessity to do well to have a happy life. The responses from American students tended to revolve more around college instead of a future job. One student said, “SAT/ACT will help me get academic scholarships and get into the school of my choice” and the student who simply said, “The ability to get into a good college”. This trend is interesting because it reveals the different mindsets French and American students have about what standardized testing will help them achieve.

Parents also received a survey to determine their thoughts on standardized testing. When asked if they worried for their child the night before an exam, 100% of French parents and 75% of American parents agreed. One hundred percent of French parents and 75% of American parents admitted to putting pressure on their child to succeed on tests. When asked if their child put pressure on themselves, 91% of French parents agreed and 76% of American parents agreed. Seventy-two percent of French parents said they were worried about the impact exams have on their student and 42% of American parents said the same. When asked if their student felt the need to study, 100% of French parents and 92% of American parents agreed. Eighty-two percent of French parents said that they encouraged their child to study more than they do; 100% of American parents so encouraged. Forty-five percent of French and 41% of American parents said that their child has had to sacrifice extracurricular activities because of testing. When asked if the student ever consulted a doctor because of stress, 36% of French parents and 0% of American parents agreed. Seventy-two percent of French parents want their student to attend a university and 55% want their student to attend a grand ecole. One hundred percent of American parents strongly agreed to wanting their child to obtain a college education. When asked if they thought testing results will help to determine their child’s future, 82% of French and 92% of American parents agreed. Seventy-two of French parents agreed that testing results are becoming increasingly important while 84% of American parents believed the same.

When parents were asked their thoughts on testing, some conflicting responses became apparent. While one French parent said, “Stress is an ordeal to overcome. Adults must help the young to overcome it” another French parent said, “Parents put their stress on their children. Parents are too stressed”. One American parent said, “I feel that there are too many expectations for one test to be able to determine a child’s future, considering all the stress it causes them” and another said something similar, “Reliance on any one testing measurement is ludicrous, yet that is the environment in which we exist today. The pressure to perform well places inordinate pressure on students, teachers and administrators, forcing all to spend precious academic time prepping for the test”. One American parent just admitted, “There will be no perfect system”.

Teacher interviews in France and the United States can provide insight into what they see occurring as to students and testing. As far as symptoms, both American and French teachers said that the most obvious symptom was complete “blanking” and an entire lack of focus, as if mentally the student had just shut down. One French teacher said they saw restlessness in students’ behavior, another said they had previously seen students cry, and yet another said they had been witness to anxiety attacks. Some French and American teachers said they had occasionally been contacted by parents who were concerned for their child because of stress. Every teacher interviewed said that they believed that colleges and universities place too much emphasis on standardized testing. In response to that specific question -- whether schools placed too much emphasis on standardized testing, one American teacher stated, “Yes, but I understand the emphasis because it allows for comparison of students from schools that differ greatly”. All French teachers agreed that good test scores can help a student’s future but their responses significantly differed over whether poor test scores can seriously limit opportunities in a child’s future. The American teachers interviewed agreed that test scores would have little impact on a student later in life although it can limit the school to which the student is selected. A French teacher said that test results do “…determine the access to superior schools”, but she also said that she was, “…still very attached to the system of evaluation in place”. Thus, it seems even teachers cannot agree on the best method for measuring students’ intellectual abilities.

The results from this study show that most students do experience a significant amount of stress due to standardized testing. These same students (for the most part) are also convinced of the fact that they must perform well on these tests to get into a good college and/or get a good job in the future. It is this deeply engrained belief that drives students to experience all of the symptoms that were listed earlier. As one parent said, there is no perfect system, but such heavy reliance on test scores does raise the question as to whether the tests truly are a good indicator of what students are capable of doing. Perhaps the educational systems in the United States and France could even learn something for each other. There are obviously pros and cons to each, and to attempt to achieve the best testing system that is the fairest for all students, it is necessary to be open to new ideas. In a society where students are constantly pushed to succeed, doesn’t it seem right to set up a system that provides them the ability to do so?

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