

For the past three decades female students have consistently received lower average grades than male students on both the verbal and math subcomponents of the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT). In 1996 the female students' average verbal score was four points lower than the male students', and the female students' average math score was thirty five points lower. The SAT has never been shown to be a valid indicator of a student's academic performance over a four year college career, although there is a moderate positive correlation between SAT scores and students' first year grades. It is also the case, however, that for many years the average grades for female students in all subjects are consistently higher than for male students during the first year of college. Leslie R. Wolfe, President of the Center for Women Policy Studies, has recently called for the College Board, which prepares the SAT, to eliminate the gap in female and male students' scores by removing questions on which male students regularly score better than female students. Ms. Wolfe says that lower SAT scores "rob girls of scholarships they otherwise deserve." Janice Gans, a spokesperson, for the College Board, responds that Ms. Wolfe seems to be calling for a "dumbing down of the test so that girls will do better."

Should Ms. Wolfe's suggestion of removing from the SAT exam questions on which male students regularly score higher than female students be adopted? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Ms. Wolfe's proposal should be adopted. The point of removing the SAT questions on which boys regularly outscore girls is not to increase the opportunities for girls for admission to college and for scholarships, irrespective of their academic abilities and qualifications. Instead, the SAT appears to confer an arbitrary advantage upon boys, given the apparent fact that the higher average SAT scores of boys fail to correlate with higher average college grades. In virtue of the extreme reliance of colleges and universities on the SAT in their admissions and scholarship decisions, the College Board has a strong responsibility to revise the exam continually in order to improve it as a predictor of academic success in college. Adopting Ms. Wolfe's proposal seems consistent with fulfilling this responsibility.

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