

NAS Backs Cautious Use of Ability Tests

A committee of the National Research Council has concluded that standardized ability tests—the subject of a decade of controversy and litigation—are, on the whole, valid. That is, they are useful in predicting an individual's academic or work performance, and they can predict equally well for members of minority groups as for whites. However, the committee, headed by psychologist Wendell R. Garner of Yale University, warned that the tests are only of limited use and should never be relied on as the sole measure of ability. It noted that tests have been used as a "scapegoat" for the inequalities they reflect (blacks as a group score significantly below whites) and that the abolition of testing would in no way ameliorate the problem.

The committee report* is cautiously worded and conciliatory in tone, but the members have made it clear that subverting the integrity of tests in order to enhance opportunities for minorities will not do anything to resolve the basic dilemma. Abandoning tests would not help, said psychologist William Bevan of Duke University at a meeting announcing the report: "no alternatives as information-rich and reliable as tests are anywhere at hand." Rather, it is proposed that more "flexibility" govern interpretation of tests; that other information about a candidate for a job or school admission be weighed at least as heavily as test scores in making selection decisions; and that rigid cutoff scores be abandoned.

In the field of education, the committee noted with approval that widespread IQ testing in elementary school has been radically curbed in the past decade or so. Now, the tests are primarily used for diagnostic purposes, to help determine if a student requires special education. In this area, the committee says any classification made with the aid of a test should be subjected to periodic review; that decisions should not be made on the basis of test scores alone; and that classification of a child should have "instructional validity"—that is, value for the child. In high school, the main testing issue is competency tests to determine if a candidate is literate enough to graduate. The committee has reservations about such tests unless schools give students the opportunity to do something about the results. "... minimum competency programs must involve instruction as well as assessment. . . . Diagnosis without treatment does no good and, quite literally, adds insult to injury."

Recognizing the furor over college entrance examinations, the committee concluded that institutions "should reexamine the wisdom of that requirement" since "most undergraduate institutions are not selective enough for test results to be crucial to the selection decision." This is especially true now that the baby boom has passed through school, and institutions are again hungry for students. The committee felt standardized tests have more use in admissions to graduate and professional schools, but warned that weight should be given only to tests that bear directly on the planned course of study.

The issues surrounding employment testing are consider-

ably more difficult to address. The report points out that employers are in a double bind created by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's guidelines for employment testing, which reflect "a dramatic shift in government policy from the requirement of equal treatment to that of equal outcome." In other words, it is not enough for employers to administer tests that are valid predictors of job performance. The requirement has become that the tests must not demonstrate "adverse impact" against minorities. Thus, says the report, "employment selection is caught up in a disruptive tension between employers' interest in prompting work force efficiency and the governmental effort to insure equal employment." Because of the demands of the guidelines, courts have ruled against many tests, including good ones. Some companies are abandoning testing altogether in order to keep from being challenged on them. Even the federal government is being forced to compromise or abandon tests. The State Department lowers the passing score by 5 points in its Foreign Service examination when it is administered to a minority member. And the Professional and Administrative Career Examination (PACE), the government's entry-level exam, is now being phased out as a result of a suit alleging discrimination against blacks and Hispanics.

Courts keep telling employers to come up with valid alternatives that have less adverse impact than tests, but so far none has been found. The report notes that any test, verbal or not, that measures cognitive abilities reflects the same black-white difference of one standard deviation that standardized tests do.† The committee firmly dismisses the question of test bias. In testing jargon, a biased test is one which shows "differential validity"—that is, it is a better predictor of performance for one group than for another. But on this measure, standardized tests have repeatedly been shown to be valid. The committee acknowledges they are biased inasmuch as they are culture-dependent, but there is no such thing as a test that does not reflect the culture in which it was created. Says the report, so long as some groups "continue to have a relatively high proportion of less education and more disadvantaged members than the general population, those social facts are likely to be reflected in test scores. That is, even highly valid tests will have adverse impact."

The general thrust of the committee's report was that tests are useful and more equitable than no tests would be. As James McGhee of the National Urban League said poignantly, "at least we're being excluded by an objective standard." Although the committee made it clear that in selecting students or employees other factors—including social equity—should be balanced along with test scores, the current climate may not be conducive to this approach. On the contrary, the combination of rising unemployment and the pressure to improve the country's economic productivity, not to mention the Administration's retrenchment on Affirmative Action and social programs, could portend even heavier reliance on testing in the future.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

*The two-part report, "Ability Tests: Uses, Consequences and Controversies," is available from the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20418. Part I costs \$13.95; part II, containing documentation, costs \$24.95.

†One standard deviation translates into a dramatic discrepancy between the two groups. A test, for example, that 10 percent of whites pass is passed by 1 percent of blacks. A 50 percent cutoff score for whites would mean exclusion of 84 percent of the blacks.