

An Abstract of the Dissertation of  
David Royce Hubin for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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Title: THE SCHOLASTIC APTITUDE TEST: ITS DEVELOPMENT AND  
INTRODUCTION, 1900-1948

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Early in the first decade of this century, educators began to seek ways to measure student capacity for further learning rather than merely student recall of previous learning. During World War I psychologists gave America the "psychological examination" as part of a concerted move to professionalize their discipline, selling their new tests to educators in the postwar period as tools to measure mental aptitude. These new "psychological examinations" lacked a solid basis in cognitive theory and, in contrast to earlier essay examinations, had no "face" or "content" validity; psychologists promoted these tests based on their practical utility, i.e. their "predictive" validity. Educators embraced these post-war psychological examinations as useful stamps of objective science in making admissions decisions during a time of oversubscription to selective institutions in higher education. The College Board introduced its own psychological examination, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, in response to threats to its role in college admissions.

The SAT did not rely on well-examined precepts, rather it directly reflected the work of a single author, Carl Campbell Brigham. Although Brigham viewed early SATs as experimental and sought to limit their use, marketing forces within the College Board promoted it for wide use as a codified entity. Thus the SAT represents an ossification of a particular intellectual and professional moment in the history of psychology--a period preceding the development of cognitive psychology.

Today's SAT is little changed from its 1926 original. Marketing forces in the 1930s and the demand for the test after World War II crystalized the examination. The purpose of the examination is simply to classify; it has no power to diagnose or to provide the basis for educational interventions. Theoretical justifications of the examination still rely solely on predictive statistics rather than on clear perceptions of the meaning of aptitude and intelligence. A close examination of the SAT's development leads to skepticism about its use, and yet this test continues to play a crucial role as this nation chooses elites.