

Coaching Courses

Statistical assumptions validating predictive tests assume that the person taking the test has no previous experience with the content of the test. That assumption is not true for a group of privileged individuals.

A new dimension of concern surfaced with the publication of the "Staff Memorandum of the Boston Regional Office of the Federal Trade Commission" (FTC) with regard to "The Effects of Coaching on Standardized Admission Examinations" (1978). The Staff memorandum viewed the coaching of educational aptitude testing in light of equal education opportunity as mandated by federal law, and found educational testing wanting. The FTC memorandum presented evidence that well run coaching organizations can significantly increase test scores. The FTC memorandum found that coaching score increases (p. 1), "have a practical, educationally meaningful, effect in that coaching can be the determining factor in deciding who is admitted to undergraduate and graduate colleges and universities. The availability of coaching is positively correlated to the ability to pay the tuition at coaching schools, which can be as high as \$500 or more. Therefore coachable, standardized admission examinations create financial barriers to educational opportunities in direct conflict with our Congressionally declared national education policy."

The FTC memorandum involved a 124,022 person LSAT study group of whom 8,660 had a total of 9,029 coaching school enrollments. The data showed that increases of anywhere from 30 to 100 or more test points on a test with a possible 800 points, could be achieved by the better coaching schools. That translates to an increase of from 2 to 6 points on the LSAT test that has a possible maximum of 48 points. The test makers represented that the 48 point test is reliable to within 2 plus or minus test points or roughly 4%. Thus a person with a 27 could raise his/her score to 29 or 33 points with coaching. That difference could easily be the difference between rejection and admission at many law schools.

The FTC memorandum contained (p. 2), "* * * the existence of only one coaching school (and there is more than one) that can materially increase individuals' scores on standardized admission examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the Law School Admission Test reveals the lack of reliability and validity of these examinations. The test makers themselves tell us that standardized admission examinations should be used to help predict the academic performance of an individual in undergraduate or graduate school. Yet, since short-term preparation can increase scores, but has a questionable long-term effect, the true predictive value of the standardized examinations is suspect."

The most damning statement in the FTC memorandum involved discrimination between applicants. "The standardized admission examinations are discriminatory in a number of ways. They discriminate against any individual who either: (1) cannot afford the cost of commercial preparation or (2) elects not to attend a commercial

preparation course even if he can afford it because of acceptance of the dogma promulgated by the test makers, test administrators, and test users over the past twenty years that coaching is valueless." Two additional factors not noted in the report are that some applicants simply do not have an additional 250 hours of time to spend on coaching. Those who are successfully coached raise the national norms used to standardize the tests. Those who are not successfully coached pay not one, but several unfair penalties.

The FTC memorandum reported that educational aptitude examinations appeared to discriminate on the basis of race since certain sub-populations may receive a lesser benefit from coaching than others. The memorandum also noted that, "The economic and social benefits flowing from admission to undergraduate and graduate colleges and universities (especially the more prestigious) are axiomatic."

The FTC staff estimated that in 1979 the total cost of educational coaching, much less educational testing, was in excess of \$10,000,000. The total cost of coaching for college, graduate school and employment applicants is now far more than \$50,000,000 a year. At a time when the political administration in Washington is cutting back college student aid, the economic discrimination inherent in those numbers is weighted more than ever in favor of the wealthy.

The Federal Trade Commission was sorely embarrassed by the Boston staff memorandum. The Commission quickly watered down some of the credibility of the staff memorandum with a second, 1979 report that questioned purported methodological flaws in the data analysis. It should be noted that the Federal Trade Commission has not seen fit to subsequently commission a research study where the data analysis would be more acceptable to the FTC. The second report was not convincing. The original staff report made its point.

Coaching courses influence "aptitude" test scores. Each time that happens, national statistics are influenced in favor of those who have access to the better coaching courses. Thus the disparity between those with the \$500-\$600 tuition fee and access to the better coaching courses, and those who do not have access affects those who are not coached at least two ways. First, those who are not coached do not get the inside information necessary to increase their scores. Second, national predictive test statistics become a fraud.

Incredibly some school systems and universities are attempting to resolve the problem by offering their own coaching courses (Lynch, 1985). Owen (1985) compares various coaching courses and concludes that some courses are close to being worthless. The law School Admissions Services (Law Services or LSAS) has its own "Official LSAT Prep Test" as well as a series of "Official" preparation materials (LSAS, 1992).

There are some very good coaching courses, however, and those who have the key or the "Trick" to ETS examinations have an enormous advantage. In the real world,

the Princeton Review may have the most salable service. The New York Times reported (Associated Press, 1987) a settlement of a lawsuit between the Educational Testing Service and the Princeton Review Inc. John Katzman, the founder of the Princeton Review was reported as having admitted "distributing test questions from the company's (ETS) tests to students taking his (Katzman's) course giving them an unfair edge in the tests." (Insertions added for clarity.) Katzman was reported in an interview as having boasted that the lawsuit, "quadrupled" his business at \$595 per student. Since its founding in 1981, the Princeton Review alone had grown to become a multi-million dollar business annually. The ethics of this situation is now to the point where "coaching courses" that give an unfair advantage to a privileged group taking ETS tests is a national disgrace. The word cheating has been used and will continue to be used to describe this situation.

Opting out:

The New York Times (Fiske, 1984) reported that Bates College in Maine, Bowdoin College in Maine, and Sarah Lawrence in Yonkers discontinued their policy of requiring SAT scores. The University of Florida now makes achievement tests optional for those who do not do well on the SAT. The article reported that Harvard has considered achievement scores as an alternative to the SAT. The Harvard Business School dropped the GMAT test as an admissions requirement shortly thereafter (Day, 1985).

The Dean of Admissions at Bowdoin was quoted as having "serious" ethical questions" about the SAT. He noted concern about the growth of commercial "coaching" courses that help students prepare for the standardized tests. "There has been an explosion of coaching schools," he said, "but enrollment (in coaching schools) is almost stratified along financial lines. We have some real problems using something that can be so biased by economic resources. It's just not fair to minority, blue-collar and rural students" (Fiske, 1984).

The New York Times reported (Lederman, 1985) on the findings of James Kulik and his associates at the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching in an attempt to find an unbiased summary of the research literature on the subject to coaching. Kulik disagreed with previous findings of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) that the average gain by coaching was small. Kulik found that ETS "did not make clear that some individuals may make gains (through coaching) that cannot be ignored." Mr. Kulik said equality must be reached in one of two ways. "Either no one gets any preparation which is more or less how it used to be; or everyone should have enough familiarity with the test. The former cannot happen now, and that latter raises the question: who's going to pay for it?"

The Law School Admission Council, the developer of the LSAT test, has contradicted long-standing ETS coaching disclaimers by proposing to enter the coaching business (Adams, 1988). The president of LSAC, Craig W. Christensen, was quoted in the National