Frustrations With Standardized Testing Boil at Annual Admissions Conference

By ERIC HOOVER

Chauncey Veatch, the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, earned numerous rounds of applause from several thousand admissions deans and high-school counselors who gathered here on Thursday. But the loudest cheer came when Mr. Veatch, a former recipient of the National Teacher of the Year Award, made an offhand comment about the role of testing in education. "Achievement," he said, "is not just success on standardized tests."

Exactly how colleges should use standardized tests in admissions is a question that Nacac, as the association is known, has taken up in earnest. Recently, Nacac created the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission, which plans to produce its final report next year.

Speaking at a session later Thursday, the commission's chair, William Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University, described the issues the panel has begun to tackle. Although he and other members of the commission stopped short of suggesting that they would ultimately recommend the abandonment of the SAT and ACT, several said they hoped to explore whether other measures, such as subject tests and noncognitive evaluations, could -- and should -- play a more prominent role in the admissions process.

"We're interested in whether there's anything this commission can do to get the world focused on multiple criteria for college admission," Mr. Fitzsimmons said. "We would like to see more emphasis on curriculum-based tests, because we know they predict well."

During a long and spirited discussion, many members of the standing-room-only audience blamed standardized tests for a range of sins: fueling high-school students' anxieties, promoting cheating, and perpetuating inequities in higher education. Several urged the committee to consider the fact that white students score higher, on average, than black and Hispanic students do, and how that disparity affects the admissions process. One high-school counselor said that the SAT had created "an avalanche of gamesmanship that favors those who are socioeconomically advantaged."

Some members of the panel agreed that lingering score gaps had challenged the fairness of standardized tests in admissions. "The SAT for many, if not most, institutions adds predictive value," said Philip A. Ballinger, director of admissions at the University of Washington. "But are there social or cultural effects that outweigh the predictive value?"

The commission also plans to study the effect of test preparation on students' performances on tests. Some
panelists complained that there was a dearth of independent research on the issue. "If test prep really makes a gigantic difference, we should let the public know what the truth is," Mr. Fitzsimmons said. "If access to test prep is pretty much confined to the rich, we have an issue on our hands."

Mr. Fitzsimmons said the panel also plans to examine the misuse of tests by high schools and colleges, issues relating to test biases, the links between high-school curriculum and standardized tests, and ways that Nacac might better train its members how to use and evaluate tests -- and how to describe the role of testing to the public.

Mary Lee Hoganson, Nacac's departing president, said the increasing diversity of college applicants had prompted Nacac to create the panel. "We have this huge dichotomy in this country," Ms. Hoganson said. "More kids are coming to our colleges having taken standardized tests just once. How do you compare that kid to a kid who's tested, tested, and tested?"

The panel plans to present its findings at Nacac's next annual conference, in Seattle. Panelists said its final report would probably contain recommendations for admissions officials and high-school counselors.

"No one," Mr. Fitzsimmons said, "wants to produce a report that's dry, general, and simply disappears on to somebody's bookshelf."