

# Policy Notes



## A Different Kind of Thinking

Shifting Approaches to Assessment  
and Teaching and Learning for  
the Benefit of All Students

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ETS POLICY EVALUATION & RESEARCH CENTER



## A Different Kind of Thinking: Shifting Approaches to Assessment and Teaching & Learning for the Benefit of All Students

***Imagine what could be achieved if assessment and teaching and learning systems were designed with the aim of success for the entire diverse student population and the whole of each student in mind.***

Imagine what could be achieved if teaching and testing systems were designed to support the success of the full range of our demographically diverse, globally engaged, and sociologically complex student population. What conditions would best accommodate students' capacities to reveal who they are? How could such systems best encourage students' optimal performance? What information and processes would higher education institutions need to match students with the supports needed for success? More than 275 researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and college and high school students from around the world considered those and other questions at "A Different Kind of Thinking: Shifting Approaches to Assessment and Teaching and Learning for the Benefit of All Students," a two-day online conference organized by the Policy Evaluation & Research Center (PERC) of Educational Testing Service (ETS).

The event, held April 20–21, 2021, was a follow-up to ETS's 2019 event "Taxing the African American Student: The Impact and Mitigation of Structural Stigma on Test Performance and School Success." It was a tumultuous two-year interim, marked by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which further illuminated our understanding of the ways in which stress can tax a student's intellectual and emotional bandwidth—that is to say, their readiness and ability to learn.

### **The COVID-19 pandemic has further illuminated how stress taxes cognitive and emotional bandwidth.**

As of April 2022, there have been 505 million reported cases of COVID-19 worldwide, resulting in more than 6 million deaths, including some 982,322 deaths in the United States alone<sup>1</sup>. In the United States, the pandemic was accompanied by intensified political polarization and conflict; incidents of racial violence that included at least a dozen high-profile deaths of African-American individuals; sudden and severe spikes in unemployment at rates not seen since the Depression era; household food insecurity among children; and deepening divides along social, economic, and political lines. Almost literally overnight, students went from attending classes in brick-and-mortar school rooms to logging in to lessons online.

Research and common sense tell us that it would be fantasy to expect students to be able to compartmentalize their lives and cope with such stresses in order to perform to their true ability in the classroom and on high-stakes, single-day standardized admissions tests.

## Testing in Turbulent Times

As **Michael Nettles**, Senior Vice-President and Edmund W. Gordon Chair of Policy Evaluation and Research at ETS, shared in his welcome remarks, even before the pandemic struck in late-winter 2020, powerful forces had been combining to transform teaching and learning. The 14 months from February 2020 to April 2021, he noted, were among the most turbulent ever in education. By the spring of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic forced a near-total shutdown of school buildings and a sudden shift to online learning. At their peak, the closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools. Standardized testing, too, came to an abrupt halt as institutions struggled with how to safely administer assessments. Combined, these and other forces widened the equity gaps among students of different racial, cultural, regional, and economic backgrounds, and are all but certain to deepen those divides.

In Nettles's view, the pandemic also confirmed a nagging suspicion: that the U.S. education system has essentially reached the limit of its ability to deliver equity across population groups. But the pause in testing also created an historic opportunity to transform teaching and testing—to move beyond the traditional steps of incrementally adjusting curriculum and professional development in light of evidence of inequity. “We have been at the equity business for a very long time,” Nettles says, “yet gaps in academic performance among different races and SES groups persist. These gaps continue to undermine disadvantaged students literally from before birth and through primary, secondary, and postsecondary education, and beyond. And it is well past time to change.”

## Insights into Assessment and Students' Cognitive Capacity

**Beverly Daniel Tatum**, President Emerita of Spelman College, introduced the conference with an insight: “Our convening is a reminder of the value, if not necessity, of education and the need for its continuous improvement.”

Tatum set forth the questions for symposium participants to consider:

- Is it possible to regain bandwidth lost to the pandemic, racism, poverty, and other -isms? If yes, then how? And would the evidence show up in scores on student assessments<sup>ii</sup>?
- How do we continue to engage in a different kind of thinking with regard to student-centered performance?
- How do we know how, and even if, students are ready for their next level of education? Do we consider the cultural and social context in which young people are operating every day and how that context affects their ability to demonstrate what they know and can do?
- How do we know that assessments accurately represent what test takers know and can do when they are in a social context that erodes their bandwidth—that is, their ability to focus on the learning tasks at hand?

- What would education look like if we approached these questions in another way? Would we come up with different answers and would some of the disparities that we regularly report change in meaningful ways?

## Understanding What the Tests Don't Tell Us

Tatum shared the story of Donovan, a Black male student from Rockaway Queens, NY, which was highlighted in a New York Times<sup>iii</sup> article about the National Education Equity Lab, a New York-based nonprofit. Through the Lab, Donovan enrolled in an online introduction to engineering course through Arizona State University, and upon completion, he ranked number one out of the 50 students in the course. Yet, in high school, he took Advanced Placement (AP®) courses and did poorly on the exams. This caused him to second-guess going to college.

Upon concluding the anecdote of Donovan's experience, Tatum asked panelists to reflect, in the context of their roles in education, on how they could understand that there are students who don't "test" well but who nevertheless are fully capable of performing well in higher education. Panelists were asked to address how their research can deepen understanding of the disparity in Donovan's performance.

***"We should be seeking assessments that allow for students to demonstrate their aptitudes and capacities not in terms of some magical number, but in terms of their potential to take full advantage of the educational opportunities for which they are trying to gain access." - Beverly Daniel Tatum***

## Scarcity of Resources

According to **Eldar Shafir**, Class of 1987 Professor in Behavioral Science and Public Policy at Princeton University, all of us have everyday concerns that we spend time either addressing or putting out of our minds: having enough food for ourselves and our families; our physical safety; and the ability to pay for our housing are powerful stressors. According to the concept of the scarcity, being preoccupied with or weakened by food or housing insecurity, personal safety, racial, cultural, or economic biases and other core life concerns can easily interfere with people's capacities to learn by sapping attention, energy and cognitive wherewithal. It can certainly interfere with performance on standardized tests.

**Cia Verschelden**, an education consultant and author of two volumes on the impact of scarcity on cognitive bandwidth and ways to manage it, claims that scarcity tends to displace our finite amount of cognitive bandwidth that we need for basic life tasks, including academic performance. The pandemic compounded this dynamic and highlighted the unequal distribution of resources among population groups. In education, the goal must be to restore and safeguard, or at least not further drain, bandwidth by addressing resource inequities in classrooms and on campuses.





*Beverly Daniel Tatum, Spelman College; Eldar Shafir, Princeton University; Claude Steele, Stanford University; Cia Verschelden, Education Consultant*

## Pressures of Standardized Testing

Work done by **Claude Steele**, the Lucie Stern Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Stanford University, on stereotype threat highlights that the impact of cultural pressure on bandwidth is more intense around a standardized test than on everyday classwork. During a standardized test, students may feel that judgments about their intellectual ability are at stake and that if they fail, they are confirming the culture's stereotypes about people like them. It is a pernicious dynamic in which the worry drains bandwidth, which affects performance, which further drains bandwidth and performance. In contrast, coursework can feel less intense and less like a measure of the student's capability. Returning to the case study of Donovan not performing well in one context and well in another, Steele asked, "How do we understand what is happening to this student?" He argued that the difference between the two activities —test taking versus coursework — is due to the differences in cultural pressures that bear on different tasks.

Steele noted that when Donovan took his AP test, he wanted to do well. He saw that his intellectual ability, as well as his humanity, was on the line; significant consequences are tied to the testing, and the stakes mount. Research over the last 30 years shows that these kinds of pressures consume bandwidth.

And in admissions testing, there can be such intense pressure that students may remove themselves altogether from the environment to avoid the blow to self-esteem. This avoidance often leads to conclusions by others that the student lacks the critical ability to do the necessary work, especially if the student is from a demographic background already prone to cultural biases.

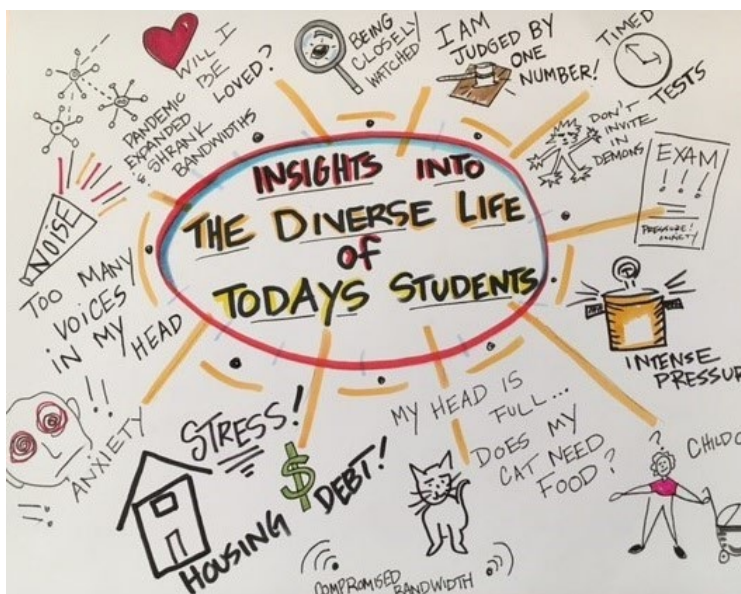
## Student Perspectives on Testing

**Joshua Aronson**, an associate professor at New York University, introduced a panel of "true experts"—10 students who detailed their experiences preparing for and taking standardized tests, some starting as early as age five, for admission purposes. Their experiences are examples of the cultural pressures Claude Steele described.

Some students shared their perceptions that admissions tests were not testing knowledge, creativity, or passion, but were instead assessing test-taking tricks, tips, and time management. They said there was intense pressure and stress because of a single test factors heavily into determining which college they attend. They were also concerned that standardized testing has turned into an industry and competition of who can afford the most tutoring, and students who cannot afford tutoring are at a huge disadvantage.

## Capturing Students' Lives

On the other hand, some students said that testing pressure can help prepare them for future high-pressure situations they may face in graduate, law, or medical school. Some also said that their test score may be what makes their college application stand out. It may be the one thing that pushes their application ahead of others.



*Sketchnote of Symposium Discussion by Maria Evans.*

Other comments from the student session included:

- Apprehension that regardless of their good grades and other factors, the single-day college entrance exam may be the sole reason they do not gain admission to their desired higher education institution.
- Distress that the intense focus on standardized test performance has created a culture and mindset that is not focused on learning, but on test performance.
- Concern about the amount of time they are spending learning strategies and “tricks” to perform well on tests rather than on learning and understanding the content being tested.

- Worry that not doing as well as expected on a standardized test can make one less sure of themselves and their academic abilities.
- Distress that external stressors, including COVID, can negatively impact their test scores.

### Reducing the Noise/Recovering Bandwidth

Verschelden observed that when thinking about testing situations, schools and assessment companies such as ETS should be asking what they can do to ameliorate the “stereotype threat” that students experience, and so restore students’ cognitive bandwidth. Among examples of ways to recover bandwidth, she cited having students take tests at community centers in their neighborhoods rather than at unfamiliar test centers or other locations; administering tests later in the day so that students don’t have to wake up earlier than they are accustomed to; and having food available. Other ideas included having pictures of people from students’ identity groups on the walls of test locations—for instance, successful people who look like them and with whom they can relate as a result—and starting the test by asking students to write about their best three qualities, greatest accomplishments, or descriptions of a goal they have achieved in order to bolster their self-confidence.

## Students’ Insights and Reflections on the Assessment Experience

### Testing to Advance Learning

Steele observed that tests are underutilized, given how constructively they can be used in education. He proposed administering 20-minute tests every two weeks in high school to familiarize students with test taking and with what is important in their schooling and what they are going to be held accountable for when applying to college. This model of systematic testing is based on a growth mindset and a formative assessment methodology that recognizes that learning happens on different timelines for different students and is a continual process.

***“I want to argue that cultural pressure is a lot more intense around standardized test taking than it is around normal coursework....But I do think testing can be very useful, because it gives us performance markers, and we can orient it and organize [a student’s] motivation. [It] can really be used so constructively in the world of education, right from the beginning on, and we underutilize that.” - Claude Steele***

### Gaming as a Potential Model for Learning

Verschelden asked, “Is there a parallel with gaming mentality of today’s young people and learning? If I don’t get this score or attain this level, you keep working to master levels and advance. You fail, but you return and keep working. You are getting constant feedback—you master one level and you keep achieving mastery—so that many young people are familiar with this kind of learning experience.”



Sketchnote of Symposium Discussion by Maria Evans.

## Looking at Testing and Assessment Differently

**Patricia Gándara**, a research professor at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Graduate School of Education and co-director of The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, posed to **Li Cai**, Director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) and professor of education and psychology at UCLA, “You and others have raised the issue of using gaming—for more equitable kinds of assessment. There is less of a correlation with one’s background in terms of one’s skill with gaming. Do any of you see the potential of assessment that uses gaming or a more equitable kind of assessment?”

Cai observed that “being always cautious about what we find today and whether it will hold in the future if we attach ‘stakes’ to it. We can structure the delivery of learning content through games, in ways that would be difficult to do in a traditional classroom setting. They are highly effective for well-defined problems. And then once you take away that scaffolding, the delivery of the learning, then it immediately becomes assessment content. The fact that you can make it more broadly available over time and make it accessible via technology has me thinking that there is great potential there. The educational technology world could be used to benefit our present discussion.”

### What Should be Assessed?

**Youlonda Copeland-Morgan**, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management at UCLA, described how UCLA is using a different kind of admissions process. Faculty who oversee and make policy for admissions adopted a comprehensive review that looks at 13 factors<sup>iv</sup>. In the last year, UCLA saw a 28% increase in applications.



Copeland-Morgan stated that such “holistic review is working at UCLA. Readers found themselves able to make strong, informed decisions about admissions for broad access to UCLA. We’re not simply looking at students’ grades and their performance on their test scores. Admissions readers take into consideration both home and neighborhood context to evaluate our students.”

### Considering Context and What Should be Assessed



*Michael Nettles, ETS; Youlanda Copeland-Morgan, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); Robert Jagers, Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL); Cheryl Talley, Virginia State University*

The UCLA factors consider the context in which students are living and learning. **Cheryl Talley** emphasized **resilience** as a key factor. Students are coming from backgrounds with differing levels of risk (scarcity of food, exposure to high rates of crime), different household sizes, and different neighborhoods, but many of these young people have high degrees of protective factors as well, including uncles, cousins, godparents, and church members who inspire, motivate, and support them along the right path. What matters is the ability to overcome challenges.

One of UCLA’s key factors is Eligibility in the Local Context, or ELC. Most students who apply to UCLA could do the work. So according to Copeland Morgan, “we have to make tough decisions based on how well the student took advantage of the opportunities available to them at their school. What this means is we pay close attention to students who graduate in the top 9% of their high school class. Neighborhood context allows us to understand the human experience of the students, what their world is like. We tell our readers ‘We want you to build a picture of this student’s world, and in the midst of all that, how did this student perform? What characteristics have they exhibited that will aid in their continued success at the postsecondary level, be it resilience, persistence, and/or time management?’... ELC is something we consider for all students regardless of the type of school they are enrolled in.”

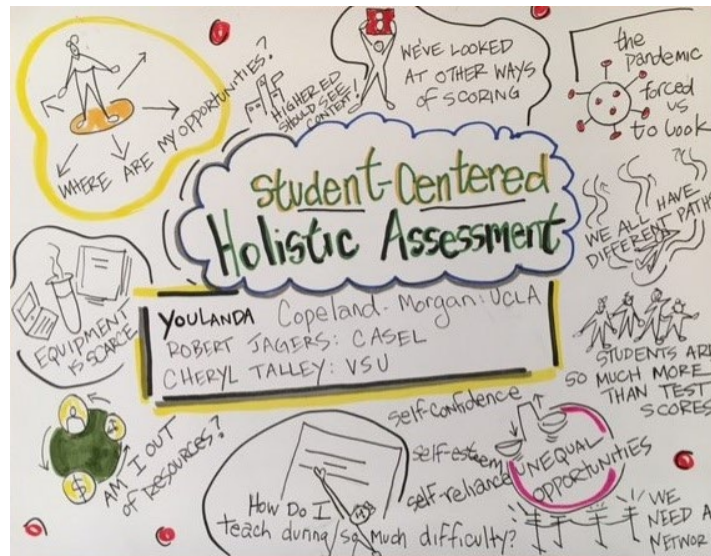
Another quality mentioned lately in conversations at some higher education institutions is grit, also known as **dogged determination**—a phrase coined by W.E.B. Du Bois<sup>v</sup>. Talley maintained that it is important to have grit, yet race and class in the United States affect all systems, and it

is not just the student's responsibility to possess and act with a certain set of characteristics. Talley believes we must consider all the concentric circles of influence that are acting upon them.

According to **Robert Jagers**, Vice President of Research for the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), exposure to the connection between high quality **social emotional learning (SEL)** and academic test scores compelled many people to see social emotional learning and their core competencies as important mediators of desirable outcomes, like academic achievement. There has been a shift in the context of many conversations about equity to include things like healthy identity development, a sense of agency, collaborative problem solving, and a sense of belonging as being important characteristics to cultivate in young people. There has been much attention on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills, including creativity and especially collaborative problem solving. "Someone who has to navigate multiple environments, with different types of people, would be better prepared to engage in a collaborative activity in order to solve difficult and important problems and be able to function as a team member and," Jagers stated, "[T]hat is the type of graduate our educational institutions, K-16, are actually looking for."

Said Talley, "As academics, we all know that getting yourself into the seat, staying in the seat, doing the work, learning to teach yourself to do these things no matter what else is happening around you is a great skill." She added that the goal should be to create interventions that support the development of this, and that we want the means of assessing if students possess these skills.

***"It takes a lot to get yourself to school if you are the only person getting yourself to school. And maybe that's something we should consider, that is ... all the ways that we can move beyond the test score to look at the context, not just the content. I think it will move the ball along." – Cheryl Talley***



Sketchnote of Symposium Discussion by Maria Evans.

## New Approaches to Assessment

Is it possible to remove the high stakes attached to these tests? Cai maintained that it is very difficult to remove the “high stakes” associated with standardized admissions assessments. How they are used and perceived makes it hard to eliminate that perception. **Deborah Bial**, founder and president of the Posse Foundation, which identifies, recruits, and trains individuals with extraordinary leadership potential, said that merit has historically been equated with the test score; in fact, merit scholarships go to students with the highest SAT or ACT scores. She added that we will never get the kind of diversity we say we want on our campuses using this definition.



*Patricia Gándara, UCLA; Debbie Bial, Posse Foundation; Li Cai, CRESST; Steven Culpepper, University of Illinois; Rebecca Zwick, ETS*

Besides the one-day high-stakes admissions tests, what other methodologies measure student potential? Said Cai, “I think that at this point we can all agree that the current assessments measure a rather narrow slice of human potential, readiness, or potential achievement ... [T]he admissions process as a whole can be reimaged, and that process and the data collected could be used to promote and prepare for the success of students both before they enter our communities and once they are there.”

Bial challenged the idea that the current academic subject knowledge measured by current assessments are really the most important for college success, asserting that leadership and other personal characteristics are more important. She argued that if merit is too narrowly defined, campuses won’t achieve representational diversity.

The Posse program was founded on the premise that if a cohort, or posse, of students went to college together, that group could offer one another the support and encouragement necessary to persist in environments not altogether familiar or supportive of diverse students. Posse uses the three-part **Dynamic Assessment Process** to identify students. In the process, students demonstrate their intrinsic leadership abilities, their skill at working in a team setting, and their motivation and desire to succeed.

Today, Posse partners with 64 colleges and universities and has helped more than 10,000 students go to college.<sup>vi</sup> Eighty percent of Posse scholars are African-American or Latinx, and 90% have graduated from college.

**Steven Culpepper**, a professor of statistics at University of Illinois, said we need to “allow for the possibility that students can change, unlike the ranking and sorting paradigm, which takes the view of students having immutable traits. ... We want to allow for the possibility that students can change and learn things, which is in fact the heart of the education enterprise.”

**Rebecca Zwick**, a Distinguished Presidential Appointee at ETS, said she and her colleagues have been conducting an approach to admissions referred to as academic cohort optimization. This method uses a mathematical technique involving linear programming that maximizes the academic performance of the entering class (using grades, test scores, and essay writing), while imposing certain requirements on class composition. The institution decides what to maximize, such as the average high school grades for the admitted class and can add such requirements as ensuring that 25% of the class come from low-income families. Her research team has used this approach at both the undergraduate and graduate levels and has found that institutions could admit a class that is more diverse in terms of students from underrepresented ethnic groups, women, students who are the first generation in their families to go to college, and students who face obstacles to admission, like attendance in high schools with no AP courses or unfavorable student-teacher ratios.

***“The solutions we seek are at hand. All we need is the courage to think and act differently.” - Steven Culpepper***

There are models of new ways of approaching assessment. Posse demonstrated the successful use of the Dynamic Assessment Process for admissions. The University of California Standardized Testing Task Force has raised questions about what an ideal admissions test looks like, leading Cai to conclude that it is possible to create fundamentally different kinds of assessments. UCLA has suspended use of standardized tests for admissions and is successfully using the 13-factor comprehensive review. Culpepper supports use of a statistical methodology that buttresses a diagnostic framework for assessment philosophically grounded in the approach of diagnose and intervene rather than sort and rank. Zwick is testing an academic cohort optimization model that can shape diverse undergraduate and graduate incoming classes.

### Challenges Faced in Attempting New Approaches to Assessment

Zwick warned that just as it is important to look at current admissions processes with a critical eye, we need to do the same with alternative approaches. We need to continue to ask questions and seek input from admissions professionals, counselors, and parents and include students.

In considering noncognitive, interpersonal characteristics, Zwick noted that we know they are difficult to measure accurately and equitably, and that characteristics such as grit or



collaboration may expand opportunities for some students but might put introverted yet talented students at a disadvantage.

### How Do We Overcome the Longstanding Problem of Racism in the Selection and Support Process for Students?

Morgan-Copeland shared two efforts underway at UCLA. One priority in UCLA's applicant review process is having multiple eyes looking at applications. Blind reads, in which all identifiers are removed from a candidate's materials, are another effort to mitigate racism from factoring into the final decisions.

Connecting with the feeder high schools to UCLA is another effort. UCLA staff are sharing feedback to high schools' leaders and counselors about why their students may not be accepted. One example Morgan-Copeland shared was their work to review the data with schools about which of their students are taking AP courses. Some schools may have students of color in their overall population but none who take AP courses or participate in other activities to prepare them to apply to college. UCLA works with the high schools to show them that their work is focused on giving students a reasonable chance at getting into college. Morgan-Copeland said this has led to increases in students taking rigorous courses and preparing for AP exams.

### New Uses of Assessment in Support of Learning



*Myra Burnett, Spelman College; Catherine Good, City University of New York (CUNY); Aditi Pai, Spelman College; Jonathan Smith, Georgia State University*

According to Gándara, "assessment should not only be about what you have learned, but about what you can learn and how well you can improve." This would mean assessments done in shorter blocks across time. Cai observed, "We have witnessed the reality that students could have access to assessments as early as 9<sup>th</sup> grade and use them as tools at any juncture and on an ongoing basis as a means of assessing how they could improve and/or uncover their interests." He added that a student could go to the public library and take practice assessments and understand what they are good at. With knowledge of their outcomes, they could then bring a concise report back to their school and practice and improve, and targeted interventions can be designed with this knowledge.

**Myra Burnett**, Vice President of Institutional Research, Planning and Effectiveness at Spelman College, said that she has long wrestled with how best to evaluate what her students have learned and how to use those assessments to improve her instructional practice. “Our aim today is to make more progress toward normalizing the enhancement of individual intellectual abilities, recognizing and amplifying everyone's talents, utilizing both standardized testing and course-based assessment.”

**Jonathan Smith**, an assistant professor at Georgia State University, cautioned that many factors can affect test performance, and modifying assessments may mitigate those factors. He discussed his research on the effects of food and home-heating insecurities on a student's ability to do well on assessments. The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, provides aid to help families afford food. But when those funds are insufficient, students can do poorly on standardized tests. The absence of air conditioning on hot days can have the same impact on student performance whether it be in a standardized testing situation or in a classroom. Conversely, he found that air conditioning can help improve test scores. These examples demonstrate how context matters.

***“Assessment should not only be about what you have learned, but about what you can learn and how well you can improve.” – Patricia Gándara***

**Catherine Good**, an associate professor at the City University of New York, shared a story to illustrate what she sees as how students perceive and experience the purpose of assessments. She was teaching a large undergraduate course on social psychology that had assessments set up every two weeks. Although the assessments counted toward a small amount of the final grade, there was mass cheating on the very first assessment. More than two-thirds of the class had joined a WhatsApp group chat and were sharing screenshots of the items on the assessment and their answers. Good rewrote the next exam to be about academic misconduct. The students then cheated on an exam about cheating. When Good checked the WhatsApp chat, she saw that the students were adamant about their right to cheat. Reasons given included:

- It's making us want to cheat. It's not right but we do what we can to pass and get good grades.
- Because school is about getting good grades and not actually about learning.
- If college was about learning, they should have changed the syllabus. Instead of giving exams, they could have figured out an alternative to see how people are keeping up with classes and how much they're learning.
- It's not right; we're paying full tuition for online classes. We didn't cheat; we're just helping each other.
- We're trying to make friends. Since social distancing, she told us to make friends. Yeah, she made us go into breakout rooms and get each other's contact information.

- I'm not sure what she was expecting. This really is her fault. All those breakout rooms; she started this. Especially with everything online. It's hard for real, like, we do the best that we can, but it's still so hard.
- It's called using our resources.

Good ended by saying, "I don't see [the students] as immoral or unethical people at all. But rather it's clear to me that they felt that the entire educational system, the assessment system, was set up so that their only goal was to do well on the exams at any cost. The learning and the curiosity that is supposed to be the cornerstone of our educational system ... never came up in our conversations that we had after this incident occurred."

**Aditi Pai**, a professor at Spelman College, shared four insights about assessment that she had gained as a student, educator, and as a director of a teaching and learning center at the postsecondary level. "I'm a fan of what people would call authentic assessments," she said. "I really like coming up with assessments that are real world. And because I'm fortunate enough to teach for a small college with a small number of students, that strategy has worked fairly well."

Burnett recommended project-based assessments, in which individual students are given a project to create and deliver. She stated that it's something that ties into the learning goals for that part of the course, and then the students demonstrate how they have used that knowledge to create something that's unique.

Pai said that faculty members walk in with content knowledge and expertise, and it is up to them to figure out what's going to work in their particular institution for their particular students. It may be necessary to train faculty to learn about both the assessments and the student and institutional contexts. Even if one knows a lot about assessment, walking in and learning about the context of the institution is going to take time. It may be important to work with faculty to overcome their fears about being judged for the teaching, of classroom observation, tenure, promotion, and renewing contracts.

## A Different Kind of Action

We ended the virtual event by asking colleagues from high schools, colleges, and universities to share their reflections on what they had heard.

**Maribel Domínguez** from Marshall Fundamental Secondary School shared her excitement that the prospect of a transformation was on the horizon. Based on these conversations, there's now a possibility of an open conversation about assessments and thinking about them in a different way, she said.

She asked that the field consider:

- How do we break that power of anxiety?

- How do we get the tools to assess our students' qualities tied to how they will actually be successful?
- How do we focus on factors that are more important in terms of assessing students' abilities and potential for succeeding at the college level?

**Daniel Gohl**, Broward County Public Schools' Chief Academic Officer, asked the panel and audience to consider how assessment is useful for learners in practical terms. He explained that in Broward County, they try to equate that assessment results are as much the student's property as the institution or assessment administrator's. Gohl suggested that learners could have a "digital wallet" that verifies their credentials when they apply for higher education or jobs, but also claimed that the current education industry is still very much a paper-based model and that these sorts of records are often fee based.

**Allen McFarlane**, Assistant Vice President, Outreach & Engagement at New York University, in considering a different kind of action cited the idiom "Change is good." "You go first. This is a powerful challenge that we all have. And I think that it is a testament to ETS for taking that first step forward in terms of change."

Talley said, "It's not that we are saying, 'Get rid of assessment.' It is, 'Could we do it differently?' I am caught up with this saying, 'It's easy to value what we measure, but it is hard to measure what we value...' People who may be under-resourced physically or materially have a wealth of resources in other areas. It behooves us to educate and humble ourselves."

## Collective Actions to Advance a Different Kind of Thinking

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed additional stress on students' shoulders, reducing the bandwidth available to take single-day high-stakes standardized tests. However, the struggles and inequities around assessment existed before the pandemic. Event participants discussed the following conclusions:

1. A revolution in assessment is needed, and ETS could be leading the charge.
2. Current assessment practices are not telling us what we need to know.
3. There are current models of different approaches recognizing a larger expanse of traits that can guide the further transformation of assessment and better address the longstanding inequities in access to postsecondary education.

***"To have courses with great assessments, we want faculty who are empowered and trained to do this kind of work and supported and nurtured." – Aditi Pai***

Participants also called for more tools and options for measuring college readiness and data points to better guide how they approach students. As Culpepper said, "As we want to think differently about assessments, one detail in these reflections is to what extent is the current framework of assessment consistent with the goals and values of what we want to have in a



diverse democracy? How do we think about assessment more generally and how do we communicate to students these values and their value? What their ability is to contribute to society?"



Sketchnote of Symposium Discussion by Maria Evans.

<sup>i</sup> World Health Organization (n.d.). *WHO coronavirus (COVID-19) dashboard*. <https://covid19.who.int/>

<sup>ii</sup> Seibel, D. (2020). *Taxing the African-American student: The impact and mitigation of structural stigma on test performance and school success* (ETS Policy Notes Volume 27, Number 1). ETS.

<https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICPNV27N1.pdf>: Bandwidth “is the total potential cognitive resources they have at their disposal. Each individual has a finite amount of bandwidth with which to go about their daily lives and a set number of things to which they can devote their thoughts and efforts.”

<sup>iii</sup> Green, E.L. (2021, February 18). A college program for disadvantaged teens could shake up elite admissions. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/18/us/politics/college-admissions-poor-students.html>

<sup>iv</sup> University of California. (n.d.). *How applications are reviewed*. <https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/how-applications-are-reviewed.html>

<sup>v</sup> Dubois, W.E.B. (1912). The economics of Negro emancipation in the United States. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 17(4), 565.

<sup>vi</sup> Posse Foundation. (n.d.). *Posse facts & figures*. <https://www.possefoundation.org/posse-facts>



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