

# 'Failure' a broad look at standardized tests

True or false, proponents of standardized testing are, unintentionally or otherwise, pushing an agenda that intrinsically advocates racism and socioeconomic oppression?

Intrigued? Then read on.

It really is an understatement to claim that standardized testing permeates every aspect of our culture. It is employed in a variety of settings and affects our lives in ways that most of us do not even realize. Nowhere, however, is its influence more evident than in our educational institutions.

Testing has become the driving force behind current efforts to reform our public schools. Unfortunately, it has a sinister dimension that has been beyond the comprehension of most of the general public.

Until now.

In "A Measure of Failure: The Political Origins of Standardized Testing," Mark J. Garrison explains, in language that is accessible to a broad spectrum of readers, what is really behind our societal obsession with standardized testing.

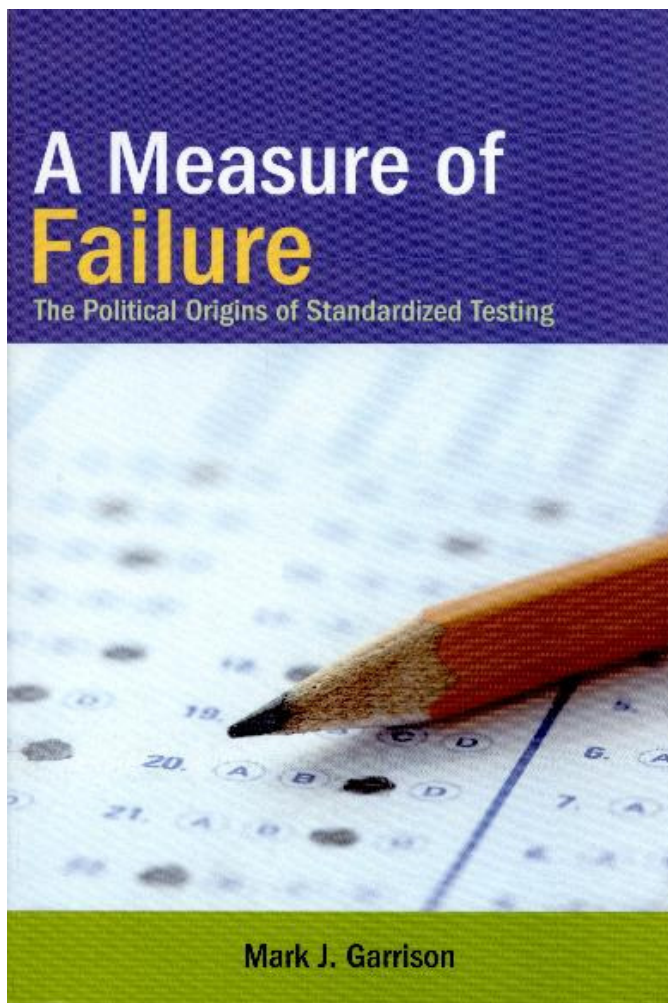
Garrison is associate professor and director of doctoral programs at D'Youville College. He received his Ph.D. in the sociology of education from the State University of New York at Buffalo. "A Measure of Failure" is based on research he conducted for his dissertation.

Standardized testing, according to Garrison, is not about "improving education" as the mantra goes. Rather, at its core, it is about control; specifically, who gets to control our educational systems and who gets to control our destiny. It is about who gets to dictate what knowledge and ideas our children are exposed to and who gets to provide them with that information.

Garrison argues persuasively that standardized tests are not the objective, empirical and untainted instruments that many of their supporters claim they are. In his view, standardized testing is a multibillion-dollar industry that is less concerned with helping individuals and institutions make informed and conscientious decisions and more focused on helping a select few within our society perpetuate their particular ideological and economic belief system.

"A Measure of Failure" provides a good historical overview of the origins and evolution of American educational concepts and applications, with an obvious orientation toward the political implications of intellectual measurement systems. "The original appeal of test data was that of its utility for public reasoning about school quality," Garrison writes. "Now things have turned around: test data mean what that those in power say they mean; the merits of argument are to be determined by examining the social status of those making the argument."

Garrison's analysis and treatment of the problems that are in



*"A Measure of Failure: The Political Origins of Standardized Testing," by Mark J. Garrison. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009. 140 pages, \$19.95.*

many ways indigenous to standardized testing are comprehensive and philosophical. Whereas many critics attempt to address the flaws of the practice by focusing on questions of technique, methodology and statistical analysis, he approaches the issue from a much more fundamental perspective.

"While very important contributions to the analysis and critique of standardized testing exist," Garrison asserts. "I think we need to move beyond what typically amounts to discrediting." Indeed, the book is predicated on a larger framework that encompasses the political, social, cultural and economic scaffolding upon which our entire understanding of measurement and assessment is deeply rooted.

Garrison sees exploitation of standardized tests as one of the principal injustices in the contemporary world. He describes how the tools have been deliberately developed, refined and administered as a means of social engineering. Furthermore, he demonstrates how tests such as the ACT and the SAT are increasingly used to sort human beings according to criteria that have more to do with social desirability than with scholastic potential.

In essence, Garrison feels that standardized tests are often used to keep individuals from lower socioeconomic classes as well as members of certain racial/ethnic groups from securing positions

of true influence and power in the political hierarchy. Far from leveling the playing field, they actually help to sustain a social system that has been consciously orchestrated to favor individuals with particular backgrounds.

Finally, it is important to recognize that Garrison believes that standardized testing has its place and can make a positive contribution to the collective dialogue if used in a more constructive manner by individuals whose motives are less suspect. Toward this end, he acknowledges that "... there is a need for assessment ... to establish a new starting point, one predicated on the equal worth, dignity, and rights of human beings and human cultures."

By most accounts, a majority of the current generation of administrators and legislators has unwittingly bought into the mythology of standardized testing — which is why "A Measure of Failure" will be required reading in my graduate testing and assessment class next semester. Maybe, just maybe, we can prevent the next generation from succumbing to the same delusions.

And as for the question posed at the beginning of this review, take time to read "A Measure of Failure" during the upcoming holiday season. Then you can decide for yourself.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University