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For-Profits' Dubious Use of Entrance Exams

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By [Frank Donoghue](#)

It would be very difficult to assess, on a broad scale and with any precision, the academic and intellectual ability of the students at any college or university, whether traditional or for-profit. One plausible place to look, though, might be to standardized tests. Books such as David Owen's *None of the Above: The Truth Behind the SATs* (1999), have challenged the ability of that widely used test to predict its takers' academic performance in college. And, according to pennlive.com, the College Board reports that now a total of 45 colleges have gone "test-optional," requiring students to take neither the SAT nor its equally popular cousin, the ACT. Interestingly enough, though, many for-profit colleges, if they administer a standardized test, use a third option, the Wonderlic test, as a de-facto entrance exam, and this led me to wonder why.

My guess is that those most familiar with the Wonderlic test (at least recently) are sports fans. The Wonderlic test, which consists of 50 questions that must be completed in 12 minutes, is administered every year at the NFL's scouting combine to college football players who are potential draft picks. The NFL headlines in late February and early March all focused on former University of Alabama quarterback, Greg McElroy, who, during the combine, nearly aced the test, scoring 48 out of 50. This led to much discussion about the test in the football media, including a breakdown of average scores by position (offensive tackles lead all other positions with an average score of 26—higher than quarterbacks—who would have guessed?). And, amusingly enough, the easiest way to find actual sample Wonderlic tests is to Google the phrase "Are you smarter than a football player?"

Many of us know how to assess SAT and ACT scores, but what do Wonderlic scores mean? The most central correlation is not to the more familiar standardized tests but to the IQ: A Wonderlic score of 20 is the equivalent of a 100 on an IQ test, in other words, the baseline for average intelligence. Having said that, at Daymar College, a privately owned for-profit with campuses in Ohio and Kentucky, the minimum required Wonderlic score for admission is 10—not 20 but 10. That should worry everyone.

But the problems are even worse. When we ask if the tests are administered fairly, the answers are even more alarming. Kaplan University, whose representatives have from the beginning of this thread been most professional—comments from them have been signed, and have identified both the commenter's affiliation and position in the company—are extremely thorough and consistent. They set different minimum Wonderlic scores for their various programs. More importantly, they require the proctors of the tests to undergo a rigorous orientation, one that culminates in an exam on which the aspiring proctors must earn a perfect score. The proctors are thus very carefully trained, and my guess is that the exams at that university are administered extremely fairly. By contrast, I have no evidence that the proctors of the Wonderlic tests administered at Daymar College are either trained or qualified.

Here are my conclusions, and they'll no doubt provoke another barrage of contentless ad hominem attacks. I think it's fair to ask whether many of the students enrolled in for-profit colleges are qualified to be in college. If the bar is set low enough, virtually anyone can enroll. That's a problem in and of itself. Add to it the financial implications of enrolling and collecting tuition from all those unqualified students, and the prospects bear an uncanny resemblance to the subprime mortgage crisis that continues to scar the country's economy. What if many of these students are unable to pay back their loans—either because they don't graduate or because they prove to be equally unqualified to be competent workers as they were to be competent students? As *The Chronicle's* Paul Basken notes in his article on the Senate hearings on the for profits, that group "consumes double its proportionate share of federal student aid" (June 22, 2010). Someone will have to pick up the tab.

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