

## Inaccuracies in Paul Tough's Portrayal of the College Board

### September 2019

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#### Summary

We had high hopes for Paul Tough's new book on college admissions, and that's why we gave him broad access to our team members, our programs, and our research. But he has crafted a one-sided narrative that badly misrepresents the College Board, our mission, and our impact.

#### Shared Ground

Paul Tough's new book — *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us* — tackles complex issues regarding equity in American education. It captures moving stories about students, professors, and administrators working to broaden access to higher education. It illuminates some of the profound challenges low-income and first-generation students face on their paths to college and shines a light on issues of critical importance, such as unnecessary math requirements.

We share Mr. Tough's desire to create more opportunities for all students. We share his concern about the destructive pressure many families feel when it comes to college applications, and we've spoken out in similar terms about ending the arms race of competitive admissions. "The crazed pursuit of college admissions helps no one thrive," David Coleman wrote in an Atlantic essay earlier this year. "Students of modest means suffer most when applying to college becomes an endless list of tasks requiring time and other resources." And as we've stated publicly, we share the conviction that a single test score should never be a veto on a student's life.

We were eager to share our work to deliver more opportunities for students. That's why we gave Tough broad access to our team members, programs, and research during his six years of reporting. We also provided a wealth of information about our programs, including access to new initiatives still in their early stages. We thought it was important to show how the College Board decides to take risks on big ideas and tackle entrenched social problems. We were open about the difficult, uneven work of pushing for change.

#### Distorted View

Unfortunately, the book grossly misrepresents the College Board's work in addressing those challenges. It's disheartening to see our good-faith engagement so harshly caricatured. Mr. Tough not only distorts the work we do, but also the motives that drive it. At a time when educational equity needs all the allies it can get, we're disappointed by his eagerness to attack those who don't share his view about the best way forward.

Here are a few areas of our work most egregiously distorted in *The Years That Matter Most*:

**Realize Your College Potential.** In 2013, Stanford University economist Caroline Hoxby and University of Virginia economist Sarah Turner published [promising research](#) about the potential of well-designed informational packets to encourage more low-income students to enroll in selective colleges.

The research suggested that this simple intervention could do a lot of good, so the College Board made a significant investment to replicate the experiment on a much wider scale; we even sent low- and moderate-income high achiever we could identify customized information to help apply to college. As a not-for-profit with

the reach and resources to replicate promising social science, we felt compelled to share this promising intervention with as many students as possible.

We saw small but initially positive results. Over the next several years, our research team refined their efforts and tried different approaches to replicate the impact of Hoxby's study. We didn't want to contradict eminent researchers publicly and claim, 'This doesn't work' until we'd made every effort to drive impact; we knew at minimum that it did no harm.

Ultimately, the results were disappointing. We published a research paper saying so, which was covered with headlines such as, "*The College Board tried a simple, research-backed way to guide low-income kids into better colleges. It didn't work.*" So to be clear, the issue is not that we didn't share this publicly – we did. Where we fell short was not sharing this information in a timely way along the way, despite stating we would. Our uncertainty about the evidence made us reluctant to enter a public dispute until we were more sure of the facts. We should've shared preliminary results along the way rather than waiting for the definitive findings. We accept that criticism and will do better.

But we cannot accept the claim that our work and investment here is just a "large-scale exercise in corporate rebranding" to advance the SAT. Or that we've somehow buried the results. We took on this work in good faith; we've shared the outcomes in good faith. And we'll keep working to scale the best of education research, seeking every opportunity to propel students forward.

It is demonstrably false to say that the College Board pursued this intervention or shaped the findings to advance the SAT. What enabled the SAT to overtake the ACT was three large states changing from giving all students the ACT to the SAT: Michigan, Colorado, and Illinois. Public documents show that the major factors in awarding these contracts to the College Board were: 1) the redesign of the SAT to better align with state standards, 2) lower price, 3) better reporting tools, and 4) higher quality service. The RYCP intervention played no role in these decisions by key states that dramatically expanded the SAT's reach, nor was it ever intended to.

**Official SAT Practice on Khan Academy.** For decades, wealthy families have paid for test preparation programs and private tutors to improve their chances on tests like the SAT. All students, regardless of family resources, should have the opportunity to practice the skills they'll need to succeed on the SAT and in college.

Over the last six years, we've invested heavily to make that equitable vision a reality. In partnership with Khan Academy, we created the most comprehensive SAT practice available anywhere, personalized for each student, and made it completely free to everyone. This, too, strikes Mr. Tough as nothing more than a branding exercise.

More than 8 million users have signed up for Official Student Practice on Khan Academy. It has helped countless students from all backgrounds improve on the SAT and get ready for college. It has severely weakened the private test prep industry; three times more students practice for the SAT on Khan Academy today than all commercial test prep combined. There are tens of thousands of low-income students every year who can testify to the power of this free resource, but Mr. Tough was not interested in speaking with any of them.

Instead, *The Years that Matter Most* spotlights the services of a \$400-per-hour private tutor in one of the country's wealthiest neighborhoods. The mere existence of such expensive tutors is, to Mr. Tough's thinking,

evidence of College Board complicity in perpetuating social inequity. He goes on to misinterpret extensive, publicly shared data about Official SAT Practice.

Mr. Tough charges that “Official SAT Practice on Khan Academy wasn’t helping struggling students catch up—it was allowing students who were already testing well to increase their advantage over the rest of the pack.” In fact, [data we released in 2018](#) shows that students with lower PSAT scores experience *larger score gains* for the same amount of time spent on Official SAT Practice than students with higher PSAT scores.

Mr. Tough also takes issue with the fact that students whose parents are more highly educated spend more time—on average—practicing on Khan Academy. We are alert to this reality and [shared the finding publicly](#), along with other detailed information about student practice on Khan Academy. It is extremely disappointing that Mr. Tough falsely claims the College Board obscured data about Khan Academy, when the reality is he ignored our seminal report—[Delivering Opportunities](#)—that focused on these exact issues.

We also took action in response to this data. We forged partnerships with urban and rural school districts across the country to encourage more students from all backgrounds to practice, which resulted in students in these districts completing over 36 million practice problems during more than 800,000 hours of practice on Khan Academy. We created a scholarship specifically to incentivize practice on Khan Academy as well as other key steps on the path to college. And we trained near-peer advisors in college access organizations to support students using Khan Academy. Again, it is striking that Mr. Tough reports on none of these actions.

The claim that low-income students would be better off in a world without free, high quality resources – a world in which only those who can pay can access SAT practice – is absurd. That is like claiming that poor families were better off in a world of private libraries rather than public ones, because when public libraries were first introduced, wealthier families used them slightly more.

Even as we press for further progress, any comparison between the world before free SAT practice on Khan Academy and the current situation shows a major step forward.

**Grade Inflation and Test Optional.** There is little dispute among researchers and policy analysts that grade inflation is a serious problem. High school grades are rising much faster than any standardized assessment, including ours, would suggest is plausible.

We highlighted data with Mr. Tough, as we have in many public venues, showing that the grades are inflating faster in schools and districts that serve wealthier students. Our analysts have reached that conclusion, as have [multiple outside researchers](#), including those from the National Center for Education Statistics and American University. Instead of engaging with that independent research, Mr. Tough distorts a finding from the College Board and implies that our discussion of grade inflation is tantamount to a “big tobacco”-style disinformation campaign.

We have publicly said that college admissions should have meaningful checks and balances. The use of a test score alone for admissions decisions is wrong; a score should never be a veto on a student’s life. Similarly, if grades were the only criteria for admission to college, we believe there unfortunately would be much greater widespread abuse and corruption than there is today.

As our own [research](#) shows, grades are slightly more predictive than SAT scores overall. Taken together, however, grades and SAT scores are much more predictive than either alone – 15% more on average. And as Mr. Tough own reporting on the University of Texas illustrates, the SAT gives colleges critical insight into the level of preparation students are bringing to college, allowing campuses to target support programs and resources where they’ll do the most good. UT requires all incoming students to take the SAT in part for this reason.

## **Undeterred**

The College Board welcomes thoughtful criticism. Sharp feedback and public accountability are integral to our work. That’s why we were so open with Mr. Tough. We believe any sustained effort to improve opportunity must be transparent and open to criticism, which is why we tout our successes and own up to our failures. That’s how the many organizations involved in this work can learn from one another and advance the widely shared goal of seeing more students succeed.

Grades, assessments, and educational outcomes are intertwined with the broader societal questions of equity and opportunity. These are facts. The College Board exists to accurately measure achievement and to do what we can to address these forces.

## **Facts and Sources in Response to Paul Tough’s Inaccurate Claims**

### **Realize Your College Potential Initiative**

- ***Paul Tough’s Claim:*** “*The College Board’s collaboration with Caroline Hoxby was in part an attempt by the organization to correct some pretty serious imbalances that had become evident in higher education. But the project had a second purpose as well, arguably just as important, if less high-minded: it was part of a large-scale exercise in corporate rebranding. The College Board, which was founded in 1900 by a group of elite eastern prep schools and colleges, is an unusual organization. Though it is technically a non-profit, it doesn’t really feel like one.*” (p. 69)
- ***Facts:*** The Realize Your College Potential initiative was created to scale promising social science research focused on college access of low- and moderate-income students. The claim of an ulterior motive focused on “corporate rebranding” is false.

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- ***Paul Tough’s Claim:*** *In 2018, the College Board quietly ended its practice of sending packets to high-scoring low-income students. And five years after the College Board told the New York Times Magazine that the public release of the new experimental results was just weeks away, the organization still hasn’t published.*
- ***Facts:*** College Board researchers publicly released a [working paper](#) documenting this intervention’s disappointing results, which has been [reported on in the media](#). The paper outlines that providing information alone was not enough to change student behavior and that the small changes in behavior among students who received college applications fee waivers and free SAT score sends were not substantial enough to change their ultimate college choices. The claim that the College Board attempted to obscure the results is false.

### **SOURCES:**

- [Realizing Your College Potential? Impacts of College Board's RYCP Campaign on Postsecondary Enrollment - May 2019 working paper](#)
- [Background on Realize Your College Potential initiative](#)

### **Official SAT Practice on Khan Academy**

- **Paul Tough's Claim:** *"If only a tiny percentage of students studied for twenty hours, why lead your public presentation with that group's results?" (p. 85-86)*
- **Facts:** In May 2017, the College Board and Khan Academy released data on students using Official SAT Practice. The 2017 public [announcement](#) highlighted research showing that students who spend 20 hours on OSP gain an average of 115 points from the PSAT/NMSQT to the SAT. The same announcement also included data about shorter practice time ***in the fourth sentence of the document Tough writes about:*** "In addition to the 115-point average score increase associated with 20 hours of practice, shorter practice periods also correlate with meaningful score gains. For example, 6–8 hours of practice on Official SAT Practice is associated with an average 90-point increase."

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- **Paul Tough's Claim:** *"Official SAT Practice wasn't helping struggling students catch up—it was allowing students who were already testing well to increase their advantage over the rest of the pack." (p. 88)*
- **Facts:**
  - Data released in the [Delivering Opportunities](#) report show that students with lower PSAT scores experience *larger score gains* for the same amount of time spent on Official SAT Practice than students with higher PSAT scores. (p. 27 of the report)
  - In his reporting, the author explicitly declined to speak with low-income students who benefited from Khan Academy, choosing instead to lionize a \$400/hour SAT tutor in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in America. For instance, Matthew Blue graduated in 2017 from Booker T. Washington High School, a predominantly African American school in Houston, Texas. He practiced 10 hours a week for several months on OSP and credits the free practice tools with his 200-point score increase. "All I had before was a dictionary and books I could take from the library, when my teachers introduced me to Khan Academy, I was so happy that it was free," he said. "The website was simple, straight to the point and it really helped me with problem solving," he added. "I was very weak in math and it really helped me get better." Matthew finished his first semester at Langston University in Oklahoma with a 4.0 grade point average. It is disappointing that Mr. Tough isn't interested in Matthew's story or the many others like it.

### **SOURCES:**

- [Delivering Opportunities report \(p. 19-24, 26\)](#)
- [SAT Practice on Khan Academy](#)
- [Press release: New Data Links 20 Hours of Personalized Official SAT Practice on Khan Academy to 115-Point Average Score Gains on Redesigned SAT](#)

### **Publishing Research**

- **Paul Tough's Claim:** *"The study [related to discrepant SAT scores] these researchers produced is not one that the College Board makes public on its website these days—for reasons that will soon become clear—but it remains the best and most complete analysis of discrepant scores that has been done to date." (p. 167)*
- **Facts:** The insinuation that the College Board attempted to hide this research is categorically false. In 2011, the College Board published the research report referenced by Mr. Tough, "An Alternative Presentation of Incremental Validity: Discrepant SAT and high school GPA Performance," in the peer-reviewed journal, Educational and Psychological Measurement. This is the standard public website for College Board research reports. Furthermore, the College Board *shared this study with the author* in the course of his reporting.

SOURCE: [Educational and Psychological Measurement](#)

### Grade Inflation Research

- **Paul Tough's Claim:** *"In 2017, the College Board launched a public-relations campaign to counteract and critique the movement toward test-optional admissions and to call into question the credibility of students' high school grades....The cornerstone of the College Board's strategy was a new academic paper by two in-house researchers...." (p. 171)*
- **Facts:** There are two corroborating studies on grade inflation conducted by researchers independent from the College Board; Seth Gershenson from American University published a paper using different data sources that reached the same conclusion about the severity of grade inflation in high schools attended by more affluent students. This study was in the [news media](#) and is easily available. The U.S. Department of Education also published a study, foundational to grade inflation research, showing that high school GPAs have increased more for White/Asian students than for Black/Hispanic students over the past few decades.

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- **Paul Tough's Claim:** *"None of the coverage [of grade inflation research] pointed out the disjunction between the paper's data and its stated conclusions." (p. 173)*
- **Facts:** Grade inflation is disproportionately impacting the high schools with the largest shares of White/Asian students and high socioeconomic status students. SAT data reveal that, as a group, Black/Hispanic students have experienced smaller increases in GPA between 2001 and 2016 than White/Asian students. Data clearly shows that public high schools with high shares of Black/Hispanic students experienced less grade inflation between 1998 and 2016. There is also a relationship between high school GPA and income. In the full sample of students from the 2013 cohort (the foundation of the validity report), the lowest income students have high school GPAs nearly one-third of a letter grade lower than students in the highest income bracket.

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- **Paul Tough's Claim:** *The public-relations campaign continued with an online "advertorial" in the Atlantic -- an article, titled "When Grades Don't Show the Whole Picture," that resembled a regular Atlantic article but was actually a paid advertisement produced by the College Board." (p. 173)*

- **Facts:** The College Board never tried to hide that this content was sponsored. In fact, the [webpage](#) for the article clearly states at the top that the content that follows below is “sponsor content,” and “posted by the College Board.” The bottom of the webpage also includes similar disclaimers: “The content was written by the College Board; it was not written by and does not necessarily reflect the views of *The Atlantic’s* editorial staff...”

#### SOURCES:

- [Fordham Institute report on grade inflation](#)
- [NCES data](#)
- [The Atlantic Sponsor Content - When Grades Don't Show The Whole Picture](#)

#### National SAT Validity Study

- **Paul Tough’s Claim:** “*The College Board’s most recent validity study was published in 2018...*” (p. 173)
- **Facts:** This is false. The [National Validity Study](#) was published in May 2019.

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- **Paul Tough’s Claim:** “*Every few years, its research department publishes an authoritative analysis of students who take the SAT. And each iteration of the validity study shows the same thing: Family income has a huge effect on students’ SAT scores...*” (p. 173)
- **Facts:** This causal claim is misleading. It is almost universally understood by researchers that the relationship between income and SAT scores is correlational, not causal. Family income is correlated with access to good pre-K educational experiences, well-resourced schools, good medical care, safe living environments, and more stable family structures. All of these factors combined lead children to greater academic achievement when measured in a standardized way across these different environmental factors. All standardized test scores are correlated with income for these reasons. Every respected researcher will make this distinction.

The validity study is among the largest SAT validity studies ever conducted, based on data from more than 223,000 students across 171 four-year colleges and universities. The study concluded that SAT scores are strongly predictive of college performance—students with higher SAT scores are more likely to have higher grades in college.

#### SOURCES:

- [National Validity Study](#)
- [Research study: The Role of Socioeconomic Status in SAT-Grade Relationships and in College Admissions Decisions](#)