

Proposition 48— College Admissions Tests: Friend or Foe?

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Abstract

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This article reviews the background of college admissions tests, specifically the SAT and the ACT. The primary discussion refers to the SAT, though some discussion generalizes to the ACT. Whether or not admission test scores can properly be used for minority students, especially those involved in intercollegiate sports, is discussed. The special problems dealing with collegiate preparation, especially for blacks, are presented.

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Some black leaders have decried the adoption of Proposition 48 by the NCAA as "patently racist." A primary objection seems to be the inclusion of scores on college admission tests, specifically, the SAT and the ACT, as a part of the regulation. However, there are some who say that this may have positive potential for the black community. The evaluation of these positions can best be handled by looking at the nature of the SAT and ACT, and results of ethnic or racial subgroups within the population. The SAT has been criticized more heavily; possibly, because it is an older test and dates back to a time of unenlightenment about racial differences and to a history of having been used by the most selective schools. The primary discussion here is about the SAT, because of its history. The ACT was not published until 1959 and has been criticized less heavily. However, the two tests are positively correlated and some discussion generalizes to both tests.

Secondly, the relationship between the athlete, his academic status, background, expectations, and his race is examined. The use of the male pronoun is used throughout this article because, at this time, most of the problems associated with being a "jock," especially a black "jock," are primarily male. There are many reasons, two of which are (1) the recruiting of female athletes is seldom perceived to be as aggressive, and (2) probably the most telling, is the hoped-for riches to be gained from playing male professional sports. This, of course, does not mean that the female is

completely immune, now or in the future, from suffering some of the same problems.

Standardized tests were developed early in the 20th century. At that time scientists were beginning to develop instruments for the measurement of individual differences. It was obvious from observation that not every one was alike, not only in appearance but in behavior. Scientists wanted to find ways of analyzing these differences, hypothesizing that if researchers understood these differences better, people could be helped to lead happier, more productive lives. Betz (as cited in Delworth, 1980)

America's entry into World War I provided the test developers with a unique opportunity to demonstrate the uses of these fairly new devices. One problem present with most new developments or products is determining their limits. In the beginning, many of those using the tests were satisfied with them, since they were only looking at the high scores, which are reasonably reliable; however, the meaning of the low score was not completely understood and some serious errors in interpretation occurred. Unfortunately, some of the leading experts of the day were firmly convinced by the data they had found that the differences they saw in scores between racial and ethnic subgroups were due entirely to inherited factors, something some of the experts called the "germ plasm." The data from the results of the Army tests, the National Intelligence Test, was broken down into racial and ethnic subgroups and used by racists of that day to decry the inferiority of most racial and ethnic subgroups. Because of this, some have felt the tests were intended for the purpose of belittling minorities. Though they were certainly used in this way at one time, this does not mean that was the purpose for which they were intended. The errors, the unreliability of some low test scores, were not understood by some, even with the public statements made by men, such as Carl Campbell Brigham, the "father of the SAT," who stated in the New York Times, December 4, 1938 (cited in Saretzky, 1982):

The original and fallacious concept of the I.Q. was that it reported some mysterious attribute but now it is generally conceded that all tests are susceptible to training and to varying degrees of environmental opportunity. The tests measure a result and not its origin. Different types of tests will vary in their sensitivity to environmental opportunity, and it is ridiculous to claim that any test score is related to the germ plasm, and that alone. (p. 17).

When the SAT was developed in 1926, the "selective" colleges needed no help in keeping minorities or anybody else out. What they needed was a method of selecting the best of the large group of students, who otherwise could not qualify for admission; therefore, any implication that it was developed as a racist tool is unwarranted. Cronbach (1975) writes of the SAT:

On many fronts, a procedure that came in as an impartial application of scientific findings about talent is now under bitter attack. The irony is all the greater in that the attack comes largely from those who speak for the poor. Proponents of testing, from Thomas Jefferson onward, have wanted to open doors for the talented poor, in a system in which doors often are opened by parental wealth and status. (p.1)

One further point is made by Ravitch (1984) in explaining that the original College Entrance Examination Board tests were based on specific courses that the colleges and universities who used them thought provided the necessary preparation for college. The old tests covered specific works in literature and aspects of history thought important by educators subscribing to the tests and consequently taught by the "prep" schools. The SAT, in order to provide a more democratic opportunity for public high school students to demonstrate their potential to the colleges of their choice, developed a curriculum-free verbal portion and went to a multiple choice format.

Admissions tests can claim to show aptitude for learning because those who score high have shown they have an aptitude for learning, by doing so. Many people fail to understand that the high scores show aptitude for learning but low scores *do not* as clearly show a lack of aptitude.

Achievement tests can show what the student has learned and what he has not learned. If he has not learned a given skill, the test does not purport to claim that a student is incapable of learning, merely that he, apparently, has not yet done so. This points out to teachers, parents, and students which areas especially need work. It will be up to teachers, administrators, parents, and students to see that they have been exposed to, or taught, material thought necessary to prepare students for their futures.

There are true stories about the high-scoring student who flunks out of college. This particular instance is easily explained by the student getting involved in things he considers more interesting than studies or, for whatever reason, ceasing to function as a student, often neither going to class nor studying. There is another, less simplistic, explanation to this problem, a statistical explanation. If only students with combined SAT scores of 1500 or above are put in one class which will be graded across the entire grading scale, A through F, there are going to be some students who scored very high on the SAT, but who have failed a college course (Astin, 1984; Baird, 1984; Chickering, 1972).

The stories of students who have low scores that eventually do well need to be analyzed to determine the factors interfering with test performance initially, and to determine if the changes the student made are applicable to other students. There is, of course, the corollary to the previously mentioned statistical explanation. If an institution has a large number of students who

are in the bottom quartile or decile of those taking the SAT and are graded on a curve, there are going to be some low-scoring students who are getting A's in college.

The reasons a student might receive a low score on an achievement test are numerous. Several of the main reasons are: (1) the student was overtired or ill and was not functioning at his normal level, (2) the student suffered from test anxiety, (3) the student may not have been prepared to take the test and did not understand the instructions, (4) the student may be a very slow worker and hurt by the timed aspect of the test, (5) the student may have had weak academic preparation, or (6) the student may be unable to master the concepts tested. While several of these problems are not unsolvable, nor do they speak to any inherent lack of ability, the fact remains that, regardless of the reasons for a lower-than-average performance, the student will still have to compete against other students who do not have the same problems to overcome. These tests give students a chance to compare themselves against others so that they can be more likely to find that good college "fit" that Astin (1984) indicates is important for good college adjustment.

The short-term problems of being sick, tired, not understanding the directions, can be solved reasonably easily and a high score should be obtainable on retest. If the problems are more difficult to solve—poor academic preparation or severe test anxiety—then help needs to be given to overcome these problems. The inclusion of a high percentage of blacks in college remedial programs is cited as an example of being unfair to blacks. The problem that appears here, as in most aspects of this situation, is in the lack of understanding of the difference between findings and the causes of the findings. It is a finding that a larger percentage of blacks than whites needs remedial instruction; the reason still needs to be identified. The nature of remedial instruction, or the need for it, seems to need restating. Remedial instruction is for those who are not so well prepared as they should be. The assumption is not made that they cannot be prepared, quite the opposite: the assumption is that when the instruction is given to remedy the deficiencies previously exhibited, preparation will be satisfactory.

Cole (1984) reports that workshops were established by the NAACP for 215 low-income black youths in the 11th and 12th grades in New York City, San Francisco, and Atlanta. They worked on sharpening the reasoning and analytical skills of the students in verbal and math content areas and generally improved on the test-taking skills of the students. The clinics reported an average improvement of 50-100 points in five of the six clinics held. The pre-workshop and post-workshop tests used SAT test-type items. Five groups is a rather small number to make broad generalizations from, but it certainly indicates this is a positive approach.

These and other findings indicate that better preparation yields better test scores. When the idea of coaching clinics first appeared, there were those who said coaching does no good, and even if you get some score

improvement, the knowledge will be short lived. The first part of this would be true if all students were assumed to have had the same previous academic exposure. The second part deals with the idea of "cramming" in general. Most of these coaching clinics deal with two separate areas: (1) learning the subject matter and (2) developing test-taking techniques. Test-taking techniques need to be taught someplace. If the student has had no previous instruction, there is a high probability that improvement will be noted. Results that show there is little retention of specific subject matter should surprise no one, and can hardly be used as a reason for not studying, since similar results have been shown during the taking of college courses (Hodgkinson, as cited in Sandeen, 1976, p.65).

Cole (1984) stated that 50 percent of the enrollment in commercial coaching schools came from families with incomes in excess of \$30,000. The NAACP should be commended for their coaching clinics for the underprivileged, but to imply that students' scores are caused by the ability to pay for expensive coaching may again be interpreting findings as causes. It is a finding (Berry, as cited in Edwards, 1983) that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to score higher than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, regardless of race. One reason is pointed out by Baird (1984) in reporting that SAT scores and family income are both related to parental level of education. Mathematics states that two variables related to a common variable will be related to each other, mathematically. However, a causal relationship between the two variables cannot be assumed from this equation alone. The causes for many of these findings are complex and need to be investigated in depth but, most important, we must not take mere mathematical relationships to be those of cause and effect.

Lay and Wakstein (1985) investigated the relationship between race, academic ability and self-concept of ability. There are indications that white and black students do not use quite the same measuring sticks. Two possible explanations are given: (1) "interpersonal mediation" or "reference group" theory, which states that persons compare themselves only with those with whom they identify; (2) "subcultural encapsulation" theory stating that groups can preserve positive self-images by adopting a "system blame" excuse to explain any low self-perceptions. Possibly what we are seeing here is some of this "system blame" rationalization which whites, having no group identification, are denied. Smith & Allen (1984) found that black students who had lower levels of identification with black culture were higher achievers and reported higher levels of satisfaction.

Generally, we are a culture which likes to have heroes and causes with which to identify. It is not suggested that all should sever their ties of loyalty to any racial or ethnic group to which they belong, merely that they do not view every event only in relation to racial or ethnic origins.

When the overall average SAT and ACT scores declined, parents, educators, and policy makers demanded a return to the basics. Undoubtedly,

not all the suggestions made at this time were good ones. but the point is, the blame was put on the students' preparation, not on the students, nor on the system that evaluated their preparation. The answer to the problem of able children obtaining low college admissions test scores seems to lie with the system doing the preparing, directly or indirectly.

The figures surfacing in the furor surrounding Proposition 48 could give black leaders the ammunition they need to demand better education for their people. It does more harm than good for black leaders to oppose college admission standards with as much vehemence as they do. It gives the impression that they think that black students are incapable of meeting intellectual standards. Objective evidence does not support such an idea.

When analyzing a student's preparation, it is not fair to look just to the classroom teacher; a lot of variables must be examined. Is the climate of the school conducive to the process of education? Do the parents see an education as the key to success? Are the necessary skills offered in the schools? How many students take advantage of the "harder" courses?

It is suggested that some black athletes at the elementary and secondary levels were more likely to be placed in less demanding academic courses and were promoted without serious regard to skills development (Edwards, as cited in Ervin, Saunders, Gillis, & Hoglebe, 1985). It seems that potentially bright students, because of their athletic involvement and race, may not be receiving the encouragement and guidance necessary to develop fully their intellectual capabilities.

Children should no longer be "socially" passed along from grade to grade, not learning to read. Research in the mechanics of teaching reading is still needed, and one way or another we must teach reading in the elementary school so that it can be used to teach the skills necessary in more advanced classes. Making sure that students have the skills necessary to advance from grade to grade is probably going to require some form of competency testing. Competency tests can serve three purposes: (1) assess the skill levels of the students, (2) give them extra practice in taking achievement-type tests, and (3) diagnose any areas of particular difficulty.

Reading is vitally important to all other classes but now math courses taken and math competencies gained seem to be more discriminating than any other specific skill. Jones (1984) found that mathematics preparation, as represented by SAT scores, is directly related to the number of mathematics courses taken in high school. Blacks tend to take fewer high school math courses than whites and score lower on the SAT. However there are strong indications that much of this difference would disappear (Jones, 1984) if more black students took more high school math. Jones refers to the Education Commission of the States Task Force recommendation, that three years of high school math school be required, as being important. This could be especially important for blacks, since they do not seem to have been voluntarily electing to take as many math courses as the white students.

Baird (1984) found that three or more years of math was positively related to high-level SAT scores but unrelated to family income. Lay and Wakstein (1985) found that, in general, a larger number of students, both black and white, perceived themselves to be below average in math skills. Stuart (1985) noticed that the biggest difference in the preparation of the students in her study was in math courses taken.

The ACT (1985) and SAT (1985) booklets specifically state that they test over concepts taught during the first three years of high school math, two years of algebra and a year of geometry. Some colleges expect more than this preparation: some of their divisions expect trigonometry and include calculus on their placement tests.

It has been reported for some time that there are shortages of teachers in math and math-related science courses. In writing about mathematics education Kline (1982) cites a study by the Educational Testing Service:

As late as 1954 the elementary school teachers who were interviewed feared and hated mathematics. Naturally this influenced their teaching. Half of 370 teachers tested could not tell when one fraction was larger than another. Thus, the teachers knew less than they were required to teach. (p.26)

The lack of comfort with the subject of mathematics among some teachers, past or present, can help foster the perception of math as difficult and not much fun, which can in turn cut down on the number of math majors in college and then math teachers for our elementary and secondary schools. It is true that abstract mathematical concepts are difficult for some people to master, but most colleges expect some degree of proficiency. Mathematics is also the least susceptible to cultural bias.

One important question raised was whether or not parents see education as the key to success. Edwards (1983) sees this as a significant problem. Melvin Oliver (cited in Edwards, 1984) reports that black families are four times more likely than white families to view their children's performance in athletics as the "stepping stone" to a professional career, and the key to success. The black professional athlete is the most visible successful black individual within the frame of reference of most black children. Though there are positive aspects to the situation, the black community needs to be aware of how small the odds are of a student becoming a professional athlete. Edwards (1983), states that "fewer than 2,400 black Americans can be said to be making a living in professional athletics today."

Parents who are not themselves educated should not feel they have nothing to offer. Support is vital. Ender (1983) found opinions of and support from parents, siblings, friends, and teammates very important to student-athletes. If parents let student-athletes know they expect them to attend classes and work at academics as well as athletics, it has a very positive effect.

It may be that the argument over admissions test scores will fall into the background when Proposition 48 takes full effect and student-athletes will

have to not only score a combined 700 on the SAT or 15 on the ACT but will have to achieve a 2.0 GPA for a set of 11 core courses. It may be that before long, second-year algebra or chemistry or senior composition may be the "jock courses" instead of the generic "basketweaving" now identified as such. This will not only be good for student-athletes but for other students in the high schools who are neither competitive athletes nor potential college students.

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