The Sorting Hat: SATs and College Access

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Standardized tests are under scrutiny for no longer being reliable, valid predictors of college success. Because scores differ markedly based on race, income, and opportunity, their use in college admissions reduces access for students of color and students from lower income families. With the surge in SAT preparation, some students spend thousands of dollars to improve their score, further widening the score gap. Tests like the SAT give the illusion of achievement by merit, reward privilege, and mask differences in opportunity. In this paper I will explore the "dark side" of standardized tests and the relationship of the SATs to college access for students of color and students from lower income families.

The sorting out of individuals according to ability is very nearly the most delicate and difficult process our society has to face. Those who receive the most education are going to move into virtually all the key jobs. Thus the question "Who should go to college?" translates itself into the more compelling question "Who is going to manage the society?" That is not the kind of question one can treat lightly or cavalierly. It is the kind of question wars have been fought over." - John Gardner (as quoted in Lemann, 1999, p. 348)

College admissions can be a high-stakes gamble. Admissions committees read essays, interview students, and comb through recommendations trying to predict which students will be successful at a given college or university. Sometimes this prediction is based upon "fit" and prior accomplishments. Other times, this prediction is based upon numbers. But can grade point averages (GPAs) and SATs really predict a student's success? If they can, which students are prepared to achieve the high numbers expected at top colleges? In an educational culture where money can buy a high score, who is benefiting from standardized tests and admissions and who is getting left out? In this paper I will explore the "dark side" of standardized tests and the relationship of the SATs to college access for students of color and students from lower income families.

History of the Big Test

James Bryant Conant, President of Harvard from 1933 to 1953, wanted to use

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education to create a new aristocracy not based on class and inheritance, but on scholastic aptitude (Lemann, 1999). He believed this new aristocracy would become public servants and work for the greater good of society (Perry, Brown, & Sawrey, 2004; Lemann, 1999). At the time, Harvard drew applicants from a select number of local private schools. Admission decisions were subjective and based more upon merit (i.e. character, manliness, athletics, family) than scholarship. This policy allowed colleges to pick students from "proper" backgrounds, further solidifying the advantages for those in the aristocracy (Karabel, 2005).

Moving away from this elite practice, Conant wanted to reform higher education by recruiting talented students from outside of Harvard's traditional feeder schools. He established a scholarship program for talented male students from the mid-western United States, and charged Henry Chauncey, Assistant Dean, with developing a standardized measure of applicants. Chauncey, future founder of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and psychometrics aficionado, adapted an early form of the SAT to select scholarship students. Conant and Chauncey chose the SAT because they believed, "tests of achievement would always favor those who had the financial resources to attend the best preparatory schools and saw in the SAT a tool for restructuring society by counterbalancing the benefits of inherited privilege in favor of innate talent" (Perry et al., 2004, p. 109). Gradually, the SAT began replacing the college boards for all admissions – substituting a test of achievement with a test of aptitude as the standard college entrance exam. By claiming the ability to predict a student's success in college, the SAT gained widespread use. Despite its original intent, the test quickly began to signify elite status:

> The idea was beginning to take root among the students who took the tests and their parents that they measured inherent worth and were determinants of success in life – that the test score was the contemporary equivalent of the "virtue and talents" that Jefferson thought would qualify the members of a natural aristocracy. Yet from a technical point of view, all the tests were meant to do was predict a student's grades six months into the future. (Lemann, 1999, p. 86)

Henry Chauncey's life goal was to develop a "census of abilities" which would help people determine their most appropriate jobs and careers, not to create a test to predict initial grade success in college. In the late 1950s, the ETS ran a few trials of the Test of Developed Ability, designed to help students identify the best course of study. Although this test would have focused more on guidance than elite selection, it never passed the experimental stage. It was a longer test than the SAT, included an essay that could not be machine scored, and was more expensive. The SAT was already in use, was sponsored by Harvard, and "because it supposedly measured each student's innate ability, aptitude testing did not threaten high schools with the prospect that the quality of their teaching might be rated" (Lemann, 1999, p. 95). Much to the chagrin of Henry

Chauncey, the SAT became the official standardized test for college admission.

Can't Buy Me Aptitude

The big debate over standardized testing for college admissions revolves around the most appropriate type of test. Some believe that aptitude tests are more appropriate because they aim to measure innate ability. The president of the University of California system, Richard Atkinson, questions whether any test can really measure innate ability and has called for SAT reform. He notes the usefulness of standardized testing stating, "grading practices vary across teachers and high schools, and standardized tests provide a measure of a student's achievements that is independent of grades. But we need to be exceedingly careful about the standardized tests we choose" (Atkinson, 2002, pp. 16-17). Atkinson advocates for achievement-based tests instead of aptitude tests.

When the SAT was designed, it was accepted as both valid (accurately measured innate aptitude and predicted grades) and reliable (an individual's score would stay in the same range no matter how many times they took the test). Yet, even in the early days of the SAT, the exam only had a validity of .4 on a zero-to-one scale, and a validity of .5 if looked at in conjunction with high school grades (Lemann, 1999). After studying almost 80,000 first-year students over four years, the University of California found that the SAT II (subject area achievement tests) is a better predictor of first-year college grades than the SAT I. They also found, "the predictive validity of the SAT II is much less affected by differences in socioeconomic background than is the SAT I" (Atkinson, 2002, p. 18). Because the SAT I is not as valid a predictor of college success, Atkinson suggested colleges require SAT II tests instead of the SAT I until a better exam is developed.

Another argument for an achievement test instead of an aptitude test is the connection between K-12 education and college. University admissions requirements and standardized tests can influence the high school curriculum and raise standards of education by testing students on what they learned in high school. At present, "the SAT I sends a confusing message to students, teachers, and schools. It says that students will be tested on material that is unrelated to what they study in their classes" (Atkinson, 2002, p. 20). Because so many colleges place emphasis on SAT scores, students now study for an exam that is not designed to measure achievement. This distracts from their learning in their final year of high school, and further pushes the exam from its original purpose.

Even though the SAT was originally designed as a test for which students could not study, they can now pay for test preparation programs designed to increase their scores (Lemann, 1999). Incidentally, Stanley Kaplan began his SAT tutoring business in the 1950s, just as the SAT was becoming a national standard.

Kaplan believed the SAT was an equalizer because it gave all intellectual students a chance to attend college, regardless of their educational background. However, the SAT had always been a reliable test since a person's score would stay in the same range no matter how many times they took the test. Once Kaplan developed a method for increasing scores, the SAT neither had validity nor reliability. The test preparation business also creates a socioeconomic achievement gap. Students who can afford to pay for test preparation are more likely to improve their SAT scores. Prices for SAT preparation courses differ by location and type of course. In Vermont, Kaplan charges $899 for a 12-session Kaplan Prep course. In Connecticut, the same course is $999. Connecticut students also have the option to take a 20-hour Review Program for $2,999, a 26-hour Honors Program for $3,499, or a comprehensive 32-hour Masters Program for $4,199; none of these are even offered in Vermont (www.kaptest.com/sat). In Vermont, the Princeton Review offers a basic course for $600, and three levels of private tutoring for $2,875, $5,175, and $8,050. The price differences for students in Connecticut are $1,199, $3,600, $4,800, and $6,000, respectively (www.princetonreview.com/).

Kaplan and Princeton both have money-back guarantees. They promise their courses will help students raise their scores and do this effectively by teaching students test-taking strategies. The Princeton Review website explains, "It's not about learning more algebra, it's about knowing how to approach a standardized test. Try one of our free classes to see why we guarantee your score will improve" (http://www.princetonreview.com/college/testprep/testprep.asp?TPRPAGE=13&TYPE=NEW-SAT-PREPARE). If it is guaranteed that you can learn a few tricks to improve your score, does the SAT really measure innate intellectual and academic ability, or does it measure achievement? The success of SAT preparation courses may send students the message that it does not really matter how smart you are, it matters if you know how to take the test. And knowing how to take the test can cost upwards of $8,000. If you can study for the test and improve your score, the question remains: Is the SAT an aptitude test or an achievement test? And which will be more useful for student success?

The Myth of Meritocracy: Access Denied

This country operates under the myth of meritocracy: If you work hard, you will earn rewards. What is left out of the equation are the advantages, such as money and family pedigree, which give some people a head start. With an uneven playing field created by class, economic, and educational disparities, some people have an easier time acquiring said "merit." Those with high scores are invited to join elite institutions, whose degrees open connections to influential positions and lucrative, powerful jobs (Perry et al, 2004; Lemann, 1999). Because the SAT is based upon the IQ aptitude principle, people who receive high scores feel as though their success is the result of merit, not of inheritance. It is this principle that perpetu-

ates the illusion of fairness and equal opportunity, defines merit as an intellectual property, and excludes other types of intelligence. As Lemann notes, the SATs "judge people on their potential, not on their actual performance" (1999, p. 345).

The trouble with the SAT meritocracy myth is that education and status can be transferred to the next generation. Children with educated, wealthy parents inherit the opportunity for their own strong education and all the connections that ensue. Even though the SAT was designed to create a new aristocracy based on education and merit, not wealth and inheritance, the result was still an aristocracy. Ironically, the SAT was originally designed as an aptitude test that would minimize disparities between high schools and socioeconomic class. Today, scores vary tremendously by high school, with well-funded, high-income public and private schools having significantly higher SAT averages than poorly-funded, low-income public schools. We are left with burning questions: Should there be an aristocracy at all? How do we choose the new elite? Who gets in and who is left outside the gates?

In the 1980s, Winston Manning, a researcher for the ETS, tried to answer these very questions. He conducted a study in which he correlated SAT scores with parental income and education, creating a score predicted by class. He hoped this information would allow colleges to identify students who had achieved better than expected given their background. However, colleges never had the opportunity to use this information because the ETS refused to back the study. The Measure of Academic Talent (MAT) was "an SAT score weighted and revised to account for background factors" and showed a decrease in score difference between races (Lemann, 1999 p. 271). The key political issue with the MAT was that students from higher economic backgrounds had lower MAT than SAT scores, and students from lower economic backgrounds had higher MAT than SAT scores. In order for the ETS to use this measure, which took into account privileges that help some students attain higher "merit," the power elite would have to sacrifice their high scores. As is the case with all issues of social justice, in order for the marginalized groups to have more equal opportunity, the dominant groups must give up some of their power. The ETS was not about to risk the very condition that keeps it in business: the myth of meritocracy.

SATs, Predictions, and Success

As discussed above, the SAT is not a valid predictor of first year college grades. According to some studies, "pre-college variables that most significantly predicted college GPA were high school GPA, gender of student, and leadership experience prior to applying. Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores failed to predict success as measured by college GPA" (Mattson, 2007, p. 9). Several questions are raised: Are SATs a redundant measure in college admissions? Are tests the most appropriate measure of success? Can we really measure success in numbers? What else do SATs predict?

SAT scores are positively correlated with income: low socioeconomic status (SES) students have lower SAT scores on average than high SES students. Guinier and Strum found that "average family income rises with each hundred-point increase in SAT scores" (2001, p. 14), with students in the bottom income quartile scoring an average of 864 and students in the top quartile scoring an average of 1123 (see Table 1; Digest of Education Statistics, 2003). Colleges that use the SAT as a basis of merit will find fewer "qualified" students from low SES families. In fact,

> Students from the bottom-income quartile are only one-sixth as likely as students from the top-income quartile to be in what is defined as the credible pool of candidates for admission to academically selective colleges and universities; students who lack a parent with some experience of college are one-seventh as likely as other students to be in the credible pool. (Bowen, 2006, p. 25)

This practice segregates students by class into different types of colleges, with students from high SES backgrounds with high SAT scores at more prestigious colleges and students from low SES backgrounds with lower SAT scores at less selective colleges and open enrollment community colleges (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2004).

Table 1: SAT Distribution by Family Income (2002-2003)

Less than $10,000	864	$50,000-$59,999	1012
$10,000-$19,999	889	$60,000-$69,999	1025
$20,000-$29,999	927	$70,000-$79,999	1041
$30,000-$39,999	964	$80,000-$100,000	1065
$40,000-$49,999	993	More than $100,000	1123

Source: Digest of Education Statistics 2003, Table 133

There is also a correlation between race and SAT performance. The average score for White students is higher than the average score for students of color (see Table 2). This creates a slippery slope as the SAT is supposed to measure innate intelligence. How can an aptitude test differ between races when race is a social, not biological, construct? One thought is that racial differences in test scores are minimized when students of color are compared with White students with similar SES, parental education, and current high school course offerings (Schmidt & Camara, 2004), making the differences more about opportunity than about race. However, the SAT still has less validity for students of color than White students, over-predicting college GPA for students of color (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2004). There is also evidence that suggests that "comparable Black students in every SAT range graduate at higher rates the more selective the school they attend" (Bowen, 2006, p. 22). This indicates that the SAT is neither an accurate measure of merit, nor an accurate predictor of success, for students of color.

Table 2: SAT score distribution by race

Race	*Verbal*	*Math*
White	532	536
Black	433	431
Hispanic or Latino	463	469
Mexican American	453	463
Puerto Rican	460	457
Asian American	511	580
American Indian	489	493
Other	495	513

From Table 126: SAT score averages of college-bound seniors, by race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1986-87 through 2004-05. Digest of Education Statistics 2005

What is it about the SAT that leads to such disparities? Is it simply a result of unequal educational opportunity? Does it ask culturally biased questions? Some researchers speculate that questions involving high SES activities, such as regattas and polo, automatically exclude students from lower SES backgrounds (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2004). Others suggest that the ETS intentionally eliminates questions that more students of color answer correctly. Jay Rosner of the Princeton Review examined the experimental sections of SATs, which are used to test the validity of new questions for future exams. He found that some questions were answered correctly by more Black students than White students, yet none of these "Black preference" questions were used in future versions of the SAT. Rosner argues that the ETS has not used a "Black preference" question in ten years (Soares, 2007). He points out,

> If high-scoring test-takers – who are more likely to be White – tend to answer the question correctly in pre-testing, it's a worthy SAT question; if not, it's thrown out. Race/ethnicity are not considered explicitly, but racially disparate scores drive question selection, which in turn reproduces [racially] disparate scores in an internally reinforcing cycle. (Rosner, as cited in Soares, 2007, p. 159)

Furthermore, there is some evidence that Black students correctly answered more hard questions (questions less likely to be answered correctly) on the verbal analogy section (now eliminated from the SAT) than easy questions (questions more likely to be answered correctly), whereas the pattern was reversed for White students. Roy Freedle, a former ETS researcher, suggests this difference indicates that easy questions may be more culturally biased because they allow students to rely on words more common to dominant cultures. Hard questions require students to rely more on education than cultural or social capital (Soares, 2007).

Fullinwider and Lichtenberg (2004) offer another perspective, suggesting that low SES students and students of color are disadvantaged by other measures of college selection as well. Selective colleges admit students with high GPAs and

GPA, like SAT scores, are similarly distributed by class and race. Zwick found in 1995 that "29 percent of Asian Americans, 21 percent of whites, 10 percent of Latinos, and 4 percent of African Americans" had a high school GPA of 3.5 or above (as cited in Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2004, p. 112). Achievement gaps by race and SES are found in all quantitative measures of students' academic success. This is not surprising given the difference in educational quality found between low-end and high-end K-12 schooling. The average low SES school has 50% fewer Advanced Placement (AP) courses than the average high SES school and fewer students enroll in such courses at low SES schools (Gandara, 2002). There is also a disconnect between high school graduation requirements and college admissions requirements. "Less than half of U.S. high schools required three years of math, and just over one-quarter of high schools required three years of science. Students in private schools generally take more courses in the core academic areas than students in public schools" (Schmidt & Camara, 2002, p. 194). Thus, differences in SAT scores by race and income are compounded by unequal education, further widening the college access gap.

With such differences in educational opportunity, will removal of the SAT really improve access for students of color and students with low SES? If standardized tests shift to achievement-based tests, students of color and low-income students still may not be able to compete. Ideally K-12 education would equally prepare all students. Perhaps a shift to an achievement-based test will encourage educational policy change. If students are admitted to college based on what they learned in high school, will high schools be held accountable to higher standards? Until education reforms occur, colleges must be aware of differences in opportunity and stop relying on biased scores to make admissions decisions.

Conclusion

What is all the fuss about SAT scores? The SAT does not achieve its purported function. It does not accurately predict student success. It is not reliable, and it is reinforcing the elitism of higher education. Because high scorers are mostly upper class, White students, and because elite colleges value high scores, students from dominant groups are more likely to be accepted at elite colleges. It is unfair to compare scores between students with different levels of opportunity. If we want to increase access to higher education, we need to stop relying on standardized tests.

Approximately 740 colleges have already stopped requiring the SAT I for admission; ranging from open-admission to selective colleges such as Bates, Hamilton, and Bennington. Contrary to popular belief, it is possible to select an incoming class without using SAT scores. Eliminating standardized tests will reduce anxiety and expense for college applicants, allow students to focus on academics and learning instead of studying tricks to raise SAT scores, and begin to level the admissions playing field. It

will also allow colleges to admit students based more on fit than a false measure of merit and will help to stop the cycle of elitism in higher education (www.fairtest.org).

More research needs to be done regarding the admissions practices at colleges that no longer use the SAT. What do they find predicts success? How did their recruitment strategies change? Did the demographics of their applicants and enrolled students change? Fairtest.org reports, "Colleges that have made the SAT optional report that their applicant pools are more diverse and that there has been no drop off in academic quality" (www.fairtest.org/facts/satfact.htm). When colleges eliminate the SAT, they can focus more on essays, recommendations, and interviews and consider opportunity when evaluating candidates.

As a profession, we need to shift away from standardized assessment and towards a more personalized admissions process. While this may be difficult for larger schools with a high volume of applications, it is essential for increasing college access and decreasing the admissions frenzy. The current system reinforces the myth of meritocracy and deepens the opportunity gap. It is time to eliminate measures of "merit" and privilege and start considering factors of opportunity, fit, and learning.

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