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## In Defense of the Standardized Test

Every year, over one million students spend two hours in cold high-school rooms to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test, better known as the SAT. For their whole lives, they have been told that this test will determine their future. The students all sit down, in orderly rows, filled with stress and last-minute preparation clouding their brains. As the timer starts, many wonder why this archaic tradition is still an important part of the college application process. However, pointless as they may seem, standardized tests like the SAT play an important role in college admissions, where they are among other factors that are used to evaluate students. These tests have faced greater scrutiny in recent years – critics often point to their racist roots and the score gaps between privileged and marginalized communities. Due to this backlash, many colleges have taken a test-optional approach in which applicants can choose whether or not to submit their test scores. Many colleges aim to eliminate standardized tests from the admissions process altogether. Meanwhile, the tests' supporters hail them as the great equalizers between wealthy and less privileged students – all students get the same test. Some colleges, like MIT, have actually reinstated these tests as integral parts of the admissions process. Today, many students and educators alike are presented with a dilemma – are these tests equalizers or do they discriminate against marginalized communities? It is evident after looking through the data that, though imperfect, standardized tests like the SAT and ACT are more effective than most other metrics and therefore should be used as a factor in the admissions process.

Before arguing that standardized tests are valuable metrics, it is important to acknowledge that they are not perfect. There are various critiques of standardized testing, largely due to their complicated history and current biases. The racist origins of these tests are well-documented: “one designer of the original standardized tests in the early 20th century, Carl

Brigham, also wrote a book promoting racist theories of intelligence,” (Leonhardt) writes David Leonhardt, an education journalist from the *New York Times*. He also quotes a teacher and SAT supporter from 1926, who stated that “for some college officials, ... [the SAT] is appealing since ... the results of such a test could be used to limit the admissions of particularly undesirable ethnicities.” (Leonhardt) This quote reveals a dark secret of standardized tests – they have their roots in racism and the 20th century eugenics movement. It cannot be ignored that such tests – which are used to measure the aptitude of students from various racial backgrounds – were made by racist individuals. Furthermore, despite modern efforts to support historically marginalized groups of people, standardized tests still have score disparities between these groups and historically privileged groups. One study finds that “white students are three times more likely than Black or African-American students and twice as likely as Hispanic or Latino students to have combined SAT test scores of 1400 to 1600.” (Kantrowitz) Even in modern times, these tests show clear biases that mirror historical biases against certain groups of students. The same study found that high scores (between 1400 and 1600) were also biased towards high-income students and male students (Kantrowitz). As an explanation, Leonhardt suggests that “well-off students can pay for test prep classes and can pay to take the tests multiple times.” (Leonhardt) Results like this are concerning – the tests that determine a student’s college success are biased against historically marginalized people. This can lead to less educational opportunities for those who need them most. Clearly, these tests are not objective metrics of student aptitude, which begs the question – why should they be used for college admissions?

Despite their flaws, standardized tests are actually good predictors of success, and discriminatory results seem to be more of a symptom of societal issues than a result of the tests themselves. Compared to other metrics like high school GPA, the SAT is generally a better

metric of college success. A study by Harvard and Brown professors found that SAT scores were much more strongly correlated with college GPA than high school GPA (Chetty et al.). They also found that they were correlated with lifelong success – high SAT scorers had better odds of landing jobs at prestigious firms when compared to high GPA receivers (Chetty et al.). As Leonhardt points out, “within every racial group, students with higher scores do better in college,” (Leonhardt) meaning that scores are a good indicator of success regardless of background or race. Furthermore, research shows that “students who earn a high SAT score are extremely likely to finish college in a reasonable amount of time” (Cooper) – it is important for colleges to know which students are more likely to graduate, so keeping standardized test scores in the admissions process has a practical value. However, there is still the looming question of score gaps in the SAT. Even if they are a good predictor of success, if there are score gaps between rich and poor, these metrics only seem to show that those who are privileged usually maintain their privilege. However, there is evidence that these score gaps are a symptom of a deeper underlying issue: many American students take a test called the NAEP, a test which very few students prepare for. Unlike the SAT or ACT, there are not many expensive preparatory courses that give the rich an advantage on the NAEP. However, there are “remarkably similar” demographic gaps between NAEP scores and SAT/ACT scores (Leonhardt). The score gaps “[do not] prove that the tests are biased,” they are instead just a consequence of the fact that “most measures of life in America ... show gaps.” (Leonhardt) Of course, this does not mean that these score gaps are fine. Additional coaching for rich students almost certainly *does* help boost their scores to an extent. Educational inequalities are issues that need to be addressed, but banning standardized tests is not the way. As the data shows, standardized testing really *is* an effective

metric for success, and its demographic-based score gaps only reflect on the biases of society as a whole.

However, there are many other metrics to evaluate applicants as well – why should standardized tests be kept in use when various other admissions factors can take their place? Research shows that standardized tests are actually less biased than many other admissions factors. Furthermore, contrary to some sources, these tests may be beneficial to low-income students despite score gaps. On the bias of SAT scores compared to the bias of other metrics, one study that looked at 240,000 college essays found that “the correlation between essay content and family income is stronger than that between family income and SAT scores.” (Cooper) Wealthy students can pay for essay coaches and reviewers, sometimes outsourcing college essays to someone else. Also, poorer students often can not afford expensive extracurriculars – bassoon lessons, service trips abroad, and other admissions-boosting luxuries are inaccessible to the poor (Filipovic). In fact, research by a Harvard professor concluded that “if top colleges made their admissions decisions purely on the basis of standardized-test scores, there would be *more* lower-income students at top schools.” (Cooper) Similarly, the dean of M.I.T. stated that the year they brought back their testing requirement was the year they admitted the “most diverse class ... in [their] history.” (Leonhardt) Clearly, standardized tests are less biased than other admissions factors, since wealthy students have many more advantages in factors like extracurricular activities and college essays. Also, keeping test requirements may be *more* beneficial for low-income students than discontinuing them: studies show that good scores for low-income students are often better indicators of success than exceptional scores for higher-income students (Leonhardt). Though many critiques of standardized tests are in good faith, taking away standardized tests would only do more harm than good for low-income and marginalized

individuals. They are an important factor in the admissions process, and they should stay that way.

Standardized tests are not flawless – in fact, they *are* biased, and there *is* much room for improvement. However, while improvements are certainly welcome, it is important to recognize that taking these tests away would only worsen an already unequal education system. As the clock ticks on, it is not just the students in the cold high-school rooms that have an important choice to make. Standardized tests have been shown, time and time again, to be more effective metrics than most others that are used in college admissions. We must all recognize the importance of these tests as a factor in the admissions process, and we must make the right choices to bring our education system into a more equitable future.

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