SAT’s ‘Halo Effect’ Casts a Long Shadow

By HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD

The discussion emanating from the University of California regarding the SAT is an invigorating move for American higher education. It is long overdue. The SAT is ideally viewed as a yardstick of merit. It has been used for decades as a key criterion for admission to four-year colleges and universities. Yet, in reality, the SAT is a poorly defined test that reflects racial and economic privileges. It reproduces sex, race and class inequalities in access to the nation’s educational resources that produce wealth and power.

The SAT affords a too-easy sorting of students’ applications into the categories of admit, maybe admit and don’t admit. The problem is that many of the students in the don’t-admit category could succeed with flying colors if they were given the chance.

The SAT creates a halo effect that colors the more holistic evaluation of applicants’ statements of purpose and letters of recommendation. It creates a mind-set that is tough to overcome for students who don’t have the “test-wisness” to correctly fill the bubbles on questions that involve obscure vocabulary or reasoning that is embedded in white cultural trivia. Students might be expected to know Shakespeare or Voltaire, but they are safe if they are ignorant of Wheatley or Nkrumah. After more than 20 years of college teaching, I’ve learned that the single most important criterion for a student’s success is his or her motivation and effort, attributes that are untapped by SAT scores.

I’ve seen students with abysmal scores excel and students with stellar ones flounder. For millions of aspiring college students, the SAT tests students on material that they have not been taught. In the context of known racial inequalities in educational opportunity, the use of an inflexible yardstick such as the SAT is inherently racist. Ward Connerly, the regent who has led the movement to abolish affirmative action at UC and in the nation, suggested that he would not want the banning of the SAT to be a “proxy” for racial preferences. But the use of the SAT is, in fact, a proxy for maintaining the racial and economic advantages of rich whites.

UC President Richard H. Atkinson is correct in casting doubt on the SAT, but he is wrong in suggesting that the SAT II, a subject-matter test, is an improvement. Students are advised to take the verbal and math sections of the SAT II (and a subject area of their choosing), which recreate the same biases as the SAT I. Standardized tests cannot assess merit in the context of non-standardized educational experiences. This is also true for the tests that act as gatekeepers to the professions, the MCAT (for medicine), the LSAT (for law) and the GRE (for the social sciences and humanities).

The under-representation of minorities who face discrimination in undergraduate programs dramatically worsens in graduate schools. Much is at stake in Atkinson’s proposal because of the multibillion-dollar nature of the testing and test-preparation industries. Students waste valuable time and money in preparing for exams that are irrelevant to their success or failure in higher education. Students take the tests several times in hopes of improving their scores—a cost that is prohibitive to families that do not have financial resources.

SAT scores are weak predictors of first-year college success, explaining only 10% of the variance in grades, and have virtually no bearing on subsequent success or failure. Other measures of presumed merit, such as grade-point averages, are also problematic. GPAs are inflated by advanced placement courses that may produce GPAs above 4.0. We know that students in predominantly African American and Latino schools have less access to these courses, just as they have less access to books and experienced teachers.

In a perverse irony, African American and Latino communities support public institutions that they do not benefit from in proportion to their tax dollars. Admissions procedures must eschew criteria that have known biases and incorporate those that allow students’ drive and determination to manifest themselves. They should emphasize the more important qualities of critical thinking, intercultural awareness and a healthy skepticism of the so-called knowledge items contained in the SAT.

Instead of spending billions of dollars to exclude students, we should redirect those dollars to create more seats in more universities. At Pitzer College, students, faculty and staff have been engaged in an ongoing dialogue about the merits of the SAT. In a recent opinion study on the matter, the college’s constituencies have been nearly evenly divided. Atkinson’s bold proposal nudges us in the right direction.

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