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College Admissions Tests and Socioeconomic/Racial Discrimination

Aaron W. Hughey
Western Kentucky University

For several years, educational researchers have noted a direct correlation between socioeconomic status and scores on standardized tests such as the ACT, SAT, and GRE. It is well documented that students from more affluent families typically score significantly higher on these tests than do their counterparts from families who are less affluent.

And the relationship is linear; the higher the socioeconomic status of the family, the higher the test scores.

Now there is solid scientific evidence that the brain is physically affected by being raised in poverty. In a study that was published earlier this year in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers found chronic stress experienced from growing up in poverty appears to have a direct impact on the development of the brain. Specifically, children from lower socioeconomic families tend to have underdeveloped working memories as compared to children from families who are doing better financially.

Why is this important?

Obviously, these findings have a number of significant implications. One of the most relevant is related to how we use standardized tests such as the ACT and the GRE in our college admissions processes – both at the undergraduate as well as the graduate level. Although we often state that these tests constitute only one component of a larger admissions process, the reality is that they are often the primary criterion by which admission and merit scholarships are determined.

Moreover, it is also well-documented that several minority groups are still overrepresented in the lower socioeconomic classes. Therefore, when we deny admission to students based heavily on their scores on standardized tests, not only are we discriminating against the less affluent, we are also guilty of discriminating, by default, on the basis of race/ethnicity.

Let me be very clear on this point. It is morally and ethically wrong to deny someone admission to college (undergraduate or graduate) based on predictors that are innately flawed and biased toward more affluent applicants. Any admissions decision that utilizes standardized test scores should also take the socioeconomic status of the applicant equally into account.

So should we discard these tests?

No. But we definitely should marginalize their role in our admissions processes. Many institutions are already doing this. It would be nice if more institutions were on the leading edge of this movement instead of waiting to see what other colleges and universities are doing before adjusting their policies to reflect this inevitable trend.

Standardized tests, as they are currently used in our society, have reached the pinnacle of their utility and I am convinced that our reliance on them will decline in the future as their inherent weaknesses are more clearly understood and publicized. We need to begin to see standardized tests as much more comprehensive measures oriented more toward inclusion than exclusion.

And yes, we need to ensure that we admit students who are qualified to pursue post-secondary education. But there are better ways of doing this that do not involve an almost exclusive reliance on traditional standardized tests. Even the major testing companies are beginning to acknowledge the inherent limitations of their more established instruments as predictors of future academic performance.

In a move that has been applauded by many, the Educational Testing Service recently introduced a new instrument, the Personal Potential Index (PPI), that looks at a number of factors outside the cognitive realm that are considered essential for success in graduate school. These characteristics include creativity, teamwork, and integrity; (i.e. factors that are obviously integral to student success but are not measured by traditional tests such as the GRE). Incidentally, these are exactly the kinds of characteristics that ‘nontraditional’ (typically older, more mature) students consistently report as being the critical determinants of their success in college or graduate school. Motivation, attitude, and perseverance tend to be more accurate predictors of achievement among this group than intellectual or cognitive ability. Again, the truth is that individuals from poor families have had to deal with numerous challenges that those with more affluent origins cannot even begin to understand or appreciate. For these people, standardized test scores tend to be more reflective of their socioeconomic background – and racial/ethnic heritage – than their actual educational potential.

Standardized tests will probably always have their place in one form or another. What we need to recognize and confront is the irrational confidence we seem to have in what they actually tell us. The efficiency we achieve from these tests simply does not justify the harm they do to individuals from lower socioeconomic classes. The sooner we acknowledge and accept this, the sooner we can begin to mitigate the injustice that standardized tests inherently perpetuate.

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ACPA - College Student Educators International
(at the National Center for Higher Education)
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20036-1188, USA
tel: 1.202.835.2272 fax: 1.202.296.3286
E-mail: info@acpa.nche.edu
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