

COMMENTARY: The problem with standardized tests

Aaron W. Hughey

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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 last week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, it was found that the 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 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 is determined.

Moreover, it is also well documented that several minority groups are still over-represented 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 inherently 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 should definitely marginalize their role in our admissions processes. Other institutions are already doing this. It would be nice if we were on the leading edge of this movement, instead of waiting to see what other colleges and universities are doing before we consider adjusting our 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 assessment as a much more comprehensive and inclusive process.

And yes, we need to insure that we admit students who are qualified to be here. But there are better ways of doing this that do not involve what is, in reality, almost an exclusive reliance on standardized tests. The efficiency we achieve from these tests simply does not justify the harm they do to individuals who are negatively affected by their deficiencies.

Standardized tests will probably always have their place. But our irrational belief in what they actually tell us is way out of proportion to their true efficacy. The sooner we acknowledge and accept this, the sooner we can begin to minimize the injustices that they inherently cause.

This commentary does not represent the opinion of the Herald or the university.

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