

Cultural Disparities of SAT Scores and the Influence on Higher Education Opportunities  
for African American and Latino Students

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Abstract

Inequalities in the distribution of education resources and cultural identification can lead to lower SAT scores for African American and Latino students. By using SAT scores as one of the primary sources to determine admission to institutions of higher education, educators may be denying minority students admission to a variety of colleges and universities, depriving the student of his or her best choice and the college of an engaged and diverse student body, and contributing to the perpetuation of inequalities in the system.

The evidence contained in this literature review shows that, given the current system, those students' SAT scores do not show a lower aptitude for school, nor do they predict a less successful college career. They merely show that, in addition to negotiating a complex and unfamiliar process, African American and Latino students must also contend with subtle and varied barriers to academic preparation. It follows logically that this added burden results in lower scores. Educators can correct the inherent unfairness in the system by becoming aware of the reasons for those lower scores, and by seeking out better ways to measure past academic success and predict college behavior.

## Introduction

As an admissions professional I understand the importance of a standardized tool to measure students' learning and achievements in high school. Subject grades and work performance give application reviewers an idea about the knowledge students have gained in high school. However, states, districts and teachers all differ in their content and grading practices. I have consistently seen African American and Latino students score lower on the SAT (formally known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test) when compared with their White peers.

I was inspired to research this topic while working with a variety of minority students from diverse backgrounds and cultures. I am concerned that these low test scores have an impact on African American and Latino students' acceptance rate and the opportunities available to them in higher education. I have worked with many of these students to help provide them with higher education opportunities at private institutions. Working at a private university I am able to evaluate many aspects of a student's application, putting equal weight on grades, test scores, essays, and letters of recommendation. I am concerned about students who have applied to schools that base all admissions decisions on numeric rubrics with no flexibility. African American and Latino students may be at a disadvantage for higher education opportunities due to those requirements.

To get into the college of their choice, minority students must do battle against circumstances that can seem designed to hold them back. The application and admission systems, daunting even to those children of parents who have university educations

themselves, can be overwhelming and impenetrable to students who hope to be first generation high school and college graduates.

### Emergence of Intelligence Testing

Alfred Binet (1857-1911), a French psychologist, developed what became the most popular measure of intelligence, and one of the most recognizable overall measurements of any kind, the IQ, or intelligence quotient. Binet began his work in intelligence measurement when he was commissioned by the minister of public education to help develop techniques for identifying which children needed special help in the classroom. He developed a series of tasks of increasing difficulty for children to perform. Proceeding gradually from easy to difficult tasks, children continued performing until they reached a level of difficulty at which they could no longer succeed. The level of maximum difficulty of task the child could perform would be used to determine the child's "mental age" (Henshaw, 2006). German psychologist Wilhelm Stern suggested in 1912 that the mental age determined by Binet's tests be divided by the child's (Henshaw, 2006) chronological age, then multiplied by 100, to yield the intelligence quotient, or IQ.

When Binet's measurement technique and the resulting scale, the IQ, made the leap across the Atlantic the ensuing perversions had little to do with the measurement of IQ as Binet had defined it. Early American pioneers, men such as H.H. Goddard, L. M. Terman, and R. M. Yerkes were simply waiting for something quantitative, a measurement whose results they could bend to suit their purposes (Henshaw, 2006). IQ gave them a powerful tool with which to propagate their hereditarian, even racist, views (Henshaw, 2006).

Binet's test was only for children, but it was extended to adults in America. Little by little, the results of the IQ test, with their convenient numerical scale, became



synonymous with “intelligence” in the United States. American IQ tests became a means for ranking normal children when it was never intended to do so.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, IQ in America became not simply a means of identifying and helping children with special needs, but a means of reinforcing racial and ethnic stereotypes. It became a way of evaluating people for special purposes (school, the military, job placement, and social companionship), and of selecting the most promising students from the top of the scale while shunting aside those at the bottom (Henshaw, 2006).

During the First World War, the early psychometricians persuaded the United States Army to let them administer an IQ test to all recruits. This was the first mass administration of an IQ test, and the results were used, in an era when eugenicist ideas were conventional wisdom, to demonstrate the danger that unrestricted immigration posed to the quality of our national intellectual stock (Lemann, 2004). Carl Brigham, a young psychologist at Princeton University went to work on adapting the Army Alpha Test for use in college admissions. Brigham had loudly renounced his commitment to eugenics by 1926 when the College Board experimentally administered Brigham’s Scholastic Aptitude Test for the first time.

### Standardized Admissions Testing in Context

Over the past several years, standardized admission tests have become an progressively important factor in undergraduate admission. A rapidly escalating number of applications have initiated a more methodical approach to admission at an increasing number and variety of undergraduate institutions (Zwick, 2007). During this same period there have been reforms in elementary and secondary education at both the state and federal levels which have increased the use of standardized tests as a tool to measure educational outcomes.

Standardized admission testing was first established in the United States in the early twentieth century (Zwick, 2007). During that time, college applicants were faced with an array of entrance examinations which varied widely from school to school. The College Entrance Examination Board was founded in 1900. This board created a set of examinations which were used by the top twelve northeastern universities. The precursor to today's SAT – the Scholastic Aptitude Test – was first administered in 1926. It consisted of mostly multiple choice questions which were similar to those included in the Army Alpha tests. Army Alpha tests had been developed by a team of psychologists for selecting and assigning military recruits in World War I. These tests were directly descended from IQ tests.

The SAT, which remained essentially an IQ test, became the testing standard for American higher education. The test helped to establish a system of opportunity for all in higher education – anyone who did well on the SAT would have the chance to go to college. The popularity of the SAT further reified intelligence and allowed for its

ranking, thus providing the numerical means, not only for selecting the best students for the best training, but also for rejecting those who did not fare as well (Henshaw, 2006). This was the fundamental clash between the promise of more opportunity and the reality that, from a point early in the lives of most people, opportunity would be limited (Lemann, 1999).

The SAT has changed substantially since it was first administered in 1926. Today over a million students a year take the modern version SAT. The SAT Reasoning Test is claimed to measure “developed” critical thinking and reasoning skills needed for success in college (Zwick 2007). Until recently, the SAT provided math and verbal scores; however, it now provides scores in math, critical reading, and writing. Three hours and 45 minutes are allotted for students to complete the SAT Reasoning Test. The ability to perform well on measurements of knowledge (such as the SAT) is critically important to the individual’s future success in society.

### Social Inequities in Education

In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court decided unanimously to end school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Since that time, America has been officially committed to the provision of decent educational opportunities for all children, regardless of class or race. For much of the last fifty years, those efforts rested primarily on the pursuit of school desegregation, on programs of compensatory education for disadvantaged children, and on efforts to achieve equity among schools, particularly in school funding. Most educators believed, or pretended to believe, that if children of all races and classes sat in the same classrooms or if schools in different communities and neighborhood received equal financing, regardless of the local community's wealth and thus its ability to tax itself, the gaps in educational outcomes among children of different races, classes, and cultures could be closed (Schrag, 2003).

Ethnic score gaps in measured outcomes – test scores, high school graduation rates, and college attendance – while narrowing considerably in the 1970s and 1980s, have not been eliminated. This is in part from the gradual erosion, through either the courts or voter initiatives, of affirmative action in school placement and college admissions. In a growing list of states, race-based college admissions preferences are prohibited, thus throwing more burden on the ability of schools to provide quality preparation to students of all classes and races (Schrag, 2003).

Affirmative action programs have attempted to address the disparity in test scores among African American and Latinos. The implementation of affirmative action allowed admissions officers to take an applicant's race or ethnicity into account when reviewing

criteria, such as SAT scores, in deciding whom to admit. However, affirmative action has been controversial and banned in several states. Although the U.S. Supreme Court recently upheld the continued use of race as one factor in admission decisions, the methods for utilizing affirmative action were narrowed. States with bans continue to prohibit special admissions considerations.

California, which enrolls 14% of U.S. undergraduates (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2001), is one of the states that in recent years banned affirmative action. African American and Latino enrollment at the University of California (UC) campuses plummeted following the ban. Between 1995 and 2000, while the UC system experienced a 19% increase in the total number of admitted students, the number of African American, Hispanic, and Native American students declined by 1% (Studley, 2004). At the UC's most selective campuses, the effect was even larger. While UC Berkeley admitted 5% fewer total students in 2000 than in 1995, it admitted 42% fewer minority students. Furthermore, these declines occurred at the same time as Hispanics were the fastest growing ethnic group among California high school graduates (Studley, 2004).

School funding may not be adequate to meet the requirements of a changing economy, the varying social and education needs of different kinds of students, or the complex social and civic demands of a multi-racial society. The least qualified and thus lowest-paid teachers tend to be concentrated in the schools serving the poorest children. In addition, due to other funding distortions, education may not be equal even *within* districts (Schrag, 2003). This distribution of school funds must take into consideration the multifaceted socioeconomic and cultural divisions within our society.

During the 1990s tougher standards were set for schools across the country. These standards were often accompanied by significant increases in funding, legislation to reduce class size, and impose more demanding teacher certification standards. For a variety of reasons those reforms have had only marginal impact on the neediest schools and in some cases have made the gaps between have and have-not schools even greater.

As legislation has driven down class sizes, increasing the demand for teachers, schools serving low-income students have had an even more difficult time finding qualified people and space to house those classes. School enrollment has often grown fastest in inner-city neighborhoods, where the schools are the oldest and where land for new facilities is scarce and expensive; it is those schools which are the most overcrowded and run-down (Schrag, 2003). The vast difference in resources has left many students from poor families attending have-not schools at an even greater disadvantage in meeting standards and competing with those in better schools.

The foundation of the legislative budgeting process is in the ability of elected representatives to establish priorities among competing demands for public services. Legislatures have frequently raided state school appropriations in recessions when revenues go down. The school funds, which represent the largest single share of the budgets in most states, make a convenient target. In times of tight revenues, to keep school spending legislatively untouchable, states must require higher taxes or make other spending (particularly on health and social welfare programs, which tend to benefit the same families) even more vulnerable to cuts (Schrag, 2003).

Schools have difficulty overcoming the socioeconomic handicaps that poor and minority students bring to school. As the percentage of students from poor families and

from families speaking little or no English increases, the pressure on schools to provide for them becomes extreme. According to Schrag (2003), one child in five lived below the official poverty line. More than one-third of all American schoolchildren are needy enough to qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches. The number of children needing supplemental lunches in large cities is even higher: in New York it is 70 percent, in Los Angeles 73 percent, and in Detroit 78 percent. If socioeconomic background is such a powerful element in determining success in school, the question of whether the system should be spending whatever extra money it can find on the social service systems (housing, health and child care, and family counseling) instead of in the classroom is a significant one. All these issues profoundly touch on the lives of millions of American children and parents and on the condition of thousands of schools across the country.

### *Statement of Problem*

African American and Latino students consistently score lower on the SAT compared to White students. High importance is placed on the SAT scores during application review for higher education. This affects African American and Latino students' acceptance rate into colleges. Equally academically competent African American and Latino students are at a disadvantage in the rate of acceptance to colleges and universities. What are the social, cultural, and economic reasons for these test score gaps? And, finally, does the SAT predict first year college success as accurately for African American and Latino students as it does for White students?

*Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this literature review is as follows:

- 1) understand the context of the use of standardized tests;
- 2) provide educators with background information on why African American and Latino students may not receive high scores on the SAT;
- 3) create awareness of the disparity in scores among ethnic groups; and
- 4) generate conversation around alternate admission criteria, given the limitations of the SAT.

Educators can then utilize this information to make informed admissions decisions when reviewing applications. In some cases admissions offices may wish to place less importance on the SAT or completely discontinue the use of this standardized test in favor of personal interviews and/or an examination of extra curricular activities, leadership experience, and letters of recommendation.

*Research Questions*

What cultural and social barriers do African American and Latino students face which influence test score performance on the SAT test? How does this test score gap influence their higher education opportunities?



### Theoretical Rationale

The Social Identity Theory is helpful in understanding some of the subtle social pressures on African American and Latino students that can affect the results of college admissions related examinations. Social Identity Theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 to understand the psychological and sociological aspects of group behavior. The theory is composed of three elements: categorization, identification, and comparison.

#### *Categorization*

According to this theory all individuals categorize people, including their own selves, in order to understand their social environments. Categories such as Black, White, Latino, Muslim, and so on, are used at times. This assignment of people to a category will tell us something about them. Similarly, individuals can learn about themselves by identifying which category they belong to. It is this process that defines appropriate behavior by reference to the norms of the groups individuals see themselves in.

#### *Identification*

According to Tajfel and Turner, individuals identify with groups people feel they are a part of. Part of who individuals see themselves as, is made up from group membership. People treat members of groups as being similar to themselves in a relevant way.

*Comparison*

This theory states that in order to evaluate ourselves individuals compare themselves to others in groups. People choose to compare their groups with other groups in ways that show themselves in a positive light.

This theory relates to African American and Latino achievement on standardized tests such as the SAT. African American and Latino students may expect different outcomes from the standardized tests compared to White students. If minority students do well on a test and plan to go to college they might be shunned by family and friends for trying to be “too White.” In addition, for these students, going away to college would possibly involve immersion in another social group (Lovaglia, 1997) and the attendant anxieties and difficulties associated with that change.

An individual’s social group and their association with achievement on tests may affect their scores on standardized tests. The cultural importance placed on the SAT is different when comparing African American, Latino and White families. This is a possible contributing factor to the explanation of why SAT scores for these minority students are lower compared to their White peers.

Thus, using the Social Identity Theory, African American and Latino students categorize themselves with others of their same ethnic heritage and identify with the norms of that group—which do not include higher education—and reject the SAT as culturally unimportant.

*Assumptions*

The SAT may not be the best predictor of students' academic performance in college. Differences in test scores between White students and African American or Latino students may be attributed to social and cultural differences rather than students' academic abilities. It is also assumed that a high test score may be less important during application review than the students' individual drive and personal belief in their own success at the college level.

*Background and Need*

The College Board, formally the College Entrance Examination Board, is a not-for-profit membership association whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity (College Board, 2006). One of its best known programs is the SAT Reasoning Test which is a measure of the critical thinking skills students need for academic success in college. For almost 80 years, the SAT has been a tool for students and families as they begin the college admissions process. It has also helped admissions officers make fair and informed college admissions decisions. The College Board is committed to the principles of excellence and equity and has implemented many research reports to review gender, racial/ethnic, language, and socioeconomic subgroup performance.

Kobrin, Sathy, and Shaw (2007) released a research report reviewing these subgroups on the most recent version of the SAT Reasoning Test. This report discussed trends in performance differences over the last 20 years. The report shows that African American and Latino students consistently demonstrate poorer performances across

academic measures when compared to White and Asian American students (Kobrin et al., 2007). The report illustrates that the problem of ethnic performance difference is pervasive across many educational tests and institutions. Inequities minority groups faced with regard to poor-quality academic preparation include rundown school facilities and under-prepared teachers, poverty, less family support, and discrimination. These factors may contribute to the test score gaps.

The report evaluated trends in students' SAT scores and compared them to their first year academic performance in college in order to determine the predictive validity of the test. Each year the College Board publishes the mean SAT scores for college-bound seniors by subgroup, so that subgroup performance differences can be assessed.

However, there has not been one comprehensive source that has published subgroup means over time so that long-term trends in subgroup differences can be examined.

Kobrin et al., fills that gap and presents a review of gender, racial/ethnic, language, and socioeconomic subgroup performance differences on the SAT from 1987 to 2006.

Disparities in the predictive validity of the SAT among different ethnicities have been found. The SAT does not predict African American and Latino college success with the same accuracy it predicts that of White and Asian American students (Kobrin et al., 2007).

## Review of the Literature

Information on the topic of cultural disparities in SAT scores is widely available. This literature review discusses the issues of academic preparation for African American and Latino students as compared with their White peers. Academic preparation can include anything from study guides or private tutoring for standardized tests to the state of school facilities and family support. Student's individual beliefs about the SAT and its connection with their future are discussed. This literature review examines evidence regarding the validity of the SAT as a predictor of first year college success. Finally, the connection of leadership experience with college success is studied. This literature review examines the following previous research topics in the areas of academic preparation, college choice and knowledge regarding the significance of the SAT, the predictive validity of SAT scores, and pre-college variables for at-risk students.

### *Review of the Previous Research*

#### Academic Preparation

Camara and Schmidt (1999) conducted a study to illustrate the pervasiveness of score differences by racial/ethnic groups and by socioeconomic status (SES). They examined differences in scores on high stakes admission tests such as SAT, ACT (formally known as American College Testing), Graduate Records Examinations (GRE), Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), Medical College Admissions Tests (MCAT), Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), as well as differences in academic preparation, high school grades, class rank and performances on Advanced Placement

(AP) examinations. Subsequent differences on important educational outcomes such as college course grades, overall college grade point average (GPA), and graduation rates were reviewed as well.

Camara and Schmidt sought to examine the ways in which test score differences are a powerful illustration of an important social problem, such as the inequitable access to high-quality education. The courses students take in high school reflect the breadth and depth of the course offerings at their school and the opportunities or challenges of which students can take advantage (Camara & Schmidt, 1999). For example, schools curriculum may contain mostly “basic” courses, or it may contain a range of advanced or honors courses. All groups of college bound students benefit from taking rigorous courses regardless of their socio-economic status, and/or ethnic background.

Both the variety and the intensity of course offerings were consistently lacking in schools located in small and rural communities. Students in high-SES schools took more courses, and more advanced courses, compared to students attending schools in other SES categories. In California, Latino students are considerably less likely to complete AP courses than other ethnic groups. Only 35 percent of Latino high school seniors in California report that they were enrolled in college preparatory programs. In addition, Latino students earn the fewest number of credits in science and math courses while in high school compared to their White peers (Camara & Schmidt, 1999). These are students who come to school less ready to learn than others. They have been provided less qualified teachers. They have been given poor facilities and, worst of all, usually they have been subjected to very low expectations at home, in their schools, and in their communities (Caperton, 2004).

According to Camara and Schmidt (1999), research has shown that parental education and family income are related to performance on tests such as the SAT. In addition, factors such as the number of books in the home, opportunities to travel, better secondary schooling, the nature of the conversation around the dinner table, and, more generally, parental involvement in their children's education, all contribute to students' academic preparation for standardized tests. Without at home support by parents and families students face even greater challenges along with their under-funded school systems.

In summary, the major finding of this research shows that the stark differences across assessments and other measures collectively illustrate the inequities minorities have suffered through inadequate academic preparation, poverty, and discrimination. Schools with a high number of minority students lack advanced and rigorous courses, have threadbare facilities and overcrowding, and teachers who are in need of professional development. The students generally have less family support. Those families who are supportive have little experience in higher education, and they suffer from overall low expectations. This research gives educators excellent insight into possible reasons why the test score gap between White students and minorities students exists and continues.

#### Knowledge Regarding Significance of SAT and College Choice

Wadpole, McDonough, Bauer, Gibson, Kanyi, and Toliver (2005) conducted a study to explore high school students' perceptions of the importance of standardized college admissions exams. These researchers used qualitative methods, such as interviews, of 227 urban African American and Latino high school juniors and seniors in

Southern California. Students came from three counties, Los Angeles, Riverside, and Orange, all of which are highly urbanized and produce approximately one half of all African American and Latino high school graduates in the state of California.

A team of researchers asked students a series of questions regarding their college choices and decisions during the interviews. Key questions included, what students knew about standardized college admission tests, including the PSAT, SAT I, SAT II, and ACT, and how they received their information. Students often were asked to clarify or elaborate on their responses; however, the interviewers did not ask students specifically whether they had taken these tests, what their scores had been, or how they prepared for the tests. Many students discussed these college admission tests at length when asked what they knew about them and the sources from which they received their information. Wadpole et al. (2005) analyzed the students' responses to the interview questions.

Students were interviewed individually and in focus groups in the fall of 1998, during their junior or senior year of high school. Students were enrolled in college preparatory courses in their urban high schools during the study. Three criteria were used to determine school eligibility: (1) the school enrolled large percentages of underrepresented minorities; (2) the school had high percentages of students taking the necessary courses for admission to the University of California (UC) schools; (3) and the school had low numbers of students eligible for admission to a UC. Therefore, these selection criteria purposefully included students whose preparation for college was inadequate.

Thirty-one seniors were interviewed individually, with the remaining eighty-six seniors and all 110 juniors interviewed in focus groups. The focus groups typically



consisted of four to six students. The interviews took place within the students' schools during their free periods or before or after the school day. Individual interviews were approximately one hour long. Focus groups were 1½ to 2 hours long. Interviewing some students individually allowed for a greater depth and understanding of the individual's process, and the focus group increased access to students whose opinions and perceptions were important to the study (Wadpole et al., 2005). Interviews were taped and transcribed on an ongoing basis.

When examining college choice it was found that African American and Latino students perceived many obstacles, including lack of information, high costs, and feelings of intimidation (Wadpole et al., 2005). The structure of college counseling and a general lack of a college culture in schools attended by many African American and Latinos may hinder test preparation because the information regarding college entrance requirements is distributed relatively late in the college preparation process. Knowledge regarding the college choice process is a type of cultural capital, and African American and Latino students often possess demonstrably inaccurate knowledge regarding college admission than their White and Asian American peers (Wadpole et al., 2005).

Although African American and Latino parents may be supportive of their children's education, some parents may be unfamiliar with the educational system and may not be able to advise their children of the process for college admission. This places these students at a disadvantage in the college choice process. These students may not fully understand the importance of test scores, grades, extracurricular activities, application essays, and letters of recommendation as valuable pieces to the application process.

Students in this study were asked what they knew about the typical standardized admissions tests, and about their sources of information on these tests (Wadpole et al., 2005). It was found that many of these college-bound students lacked important knowledge regarding the standardized tests they were required to take, the scores required for admission, and the time frame in which colleges required scores. In addition, because most did not have college-educated parents, these students were dependent on their schools for test information.

Many of the African American and Latino students were concerned about the large discrepancies between their dream schools and the schools that were within their reach based on their SAT scores. Anxiety about taking the admission tests or about scoring well was an issue raised in almost half of all focus groups in this study.

Some students raised the issue that, as underrepresented minorities, they were not expected to score well on the SAT. Six students raised the issue of test bias on the SAT and some suggested taking the ACT because it is “easier for African Americans” (Wadpole et al., 2005). The current study has shown that students perceive the tests as obstacles, and those perceptions can hinder their participation (Wadpole et al., 2005).

This study did reflect certain bias due to volunteerism for participation. However, it gives a clear understanding of how African American and Latino students perceive the SAT and why they may have a lack of college choice and admissions information. It showed African American and Latino students were lacking the knowledge of what is possible in terms of raising one’s scores, as well as knowledge of alternative strategies for selective admissions. The students had self-consciousness about the unfairness and biases of the SAT but were completely silent on the inequity of how their K-12

educational experiences had failed to adequately prepare them for the college admission process.

#### Predictive Validity of SAT Scores

In a research report conducted by Zwick (2007) it was determined that White and Asian American test takers typically receive higher scores on standardized tests compared to African American and Latino students. There is an array of reasons for these tests score gaps. However, it is particularly important to determine how well admissions tests work as a measuring device for college performance of minority students.

Zwick found that the correlations of tests scores with first year college grade point average tend to be smaller for African American and Latino students when compared with White students. In fact, when using a combination of SAT scores and high school grades it is possible to over-predict college performance for these students. Over-prediction is defined as predicted first year college grades are higher than actual grades. The tendency toward over-prediction also occurs when high school grade point average (GPA) only is used to predict college GPA. In general, high school GPA is usually more highly correlated with first year college GPA than the SAT; however over-prediction tends to be worse if only high school GPA is included in the prediction equation for minority students (Zwick, 2007).

This report states one hypothesis for this over-prediction is that minority and White students may differ in terms of the quality of their early schooling, which could influence their academic preparation. Another possible explanation is that minority students do not fulfill their academic potential in college. This underperformance could

occur because of outright racism, an inhospitable campus environment, or life difficulties, such as inadequate financial resources. It may also be due to anxieties and low aspirations (Zwick, 2007).

According to the College Board, the SAT is a good predictor of first year college grades; however, they recommend the use of a combination of high school grades and test scores. Research performed by the College Board has shown that the ability of the SAT to predict freshman grades is fairly consistent across all ethnic groups, although the test seems to predict Asian American performance best (College Board, 2006).

#### Pre-College Variables for At-Risk Students

Mattson (2007) conducted a study which examined pre-college variables from an admissions office perspective and the ability of these variables to predict college grade point average for students specially admitted into an academic support program for at-risk students. The research was conducted at a private, highly-selective, research university in the southwest United States.

This study examined the application materials of more than 900 students who entered the university through a special admission program designed to assist students determined by the admissions office as being academically at-risk. This determination was based on lower high school GPA and standardized test scores than the regularly admitted school population (Mattson, 2007). Students admitted to this program received additional support and were required to take a first year course focused on time management, college study strategies and educational psychology. Surveys were not

needed for this study because the data was already available. Pre-college information for the students in the study was obtained through admission application materials.

The students selected represented an ethnically diverse population. Their composition consisted of 39.8 percent White students, 20.5 percent African American, 8.8 percent Asian American, 19.6 percent Latino, 0.7 percent Native American, and 10.7 percent mixed/other. These students arrived with an average high school GPA of 3.36 and SAT of 1076. Although these numbers are respectable, they were below the overall student averages at the university, which in turn classified them as academically at-risk.

According to Mattson (2007), many of the students in the program were selected because of unique characteristics that make them more desirable and worthy of admission. Many had non-quantifiable talents and abilities associated with music, theatre, art, engineering, business and architecture. Many were also from diverse backgrounds to offer unique perspectives that make them attractive to the school, despite lower high school GPA or test scores.

The primary characteristics identified for this study included entry age, gender, ethnicity, first generation status, reported presence of a language spoken in the home other than English, reported leadership experience, high school GPA, and SAT scores. Three variables emerged as significant predictors of academic success in college: high school GPA, gender, and leadership experience. Logical reasons can be found for why leadership experience is able to predict academic achievement in college. Leadership ability can be attached to work drive, self-regulation and other desirable personality characteristics (Mattson, 2007).

**Table 1 (High School GPA)**

<b>HS GPA</b>	<b>SAT</b>	<b>College GPA</b>	
<b>By range</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Semester</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>
2.5-2.99	1112	2.68	2.66
3.0-3.49	1091	2.83	2.78
3.5-3.99	1046	2.94	2.88
4.0 or better	1046	3.00	3.02

Note. From “Beyond Admission: Understanding Pre-College Variables and the Success of At-Risk Students,” by C. Mattson, 2007, *Journal of College Admission*.

**Table 2 (Gender of Student)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>SAT</b>	<b>HS GPA</b>	<b>College GPA</b>	
	<b>Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Semester</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Year</b>
Male	1098	3.29	2.74	2.69
Female	1059	3.42	2.94	2.90

Note. From “Beyond Admission: Understanding Pre-College Variables and the Success of At-Risk Students,” by C. Mattson, 2007, *Journal of College Admission*.

**Table 3 (Leadership Experience (LE))**

LE	SAT	HS GPA	College GPA	
	Average	Average	1 <sup>st</sup> Semester	1 <sup>st</sup> Year
Yes	1069	3.40	2.94	2.90
No	1083	3.33	2.77	2.73

Note. From “Beyond Admission: Understanding Pre-College Variables and the Success of At-Risk Students,” by C. Mattson, 2007, *Journal of College Admission*.

Even though this study looked at students from a variety of ethnicities, it can be ascertained that the data collected is true for African American and Latino students during their application review process. The findings of this study have shown that when higher education administrators are searching for additional effective pre-college predictors of success, leadership ability and experience is one which would be useful.

#### *Summary of Major Themes*

The literature on SAT score gaps for African American and Latino students shows their test scores to be a reflection of the academic and social disparities across the nation. These students are not given the educational support, encouragement, and facilities which may be necessary for high academic achievement on standardized tests. Additional criteria may need to be examined during the application review process including but not limited to: extra curricular activities, leadership experience, and letters of recommendation.

*Literature Review: Influence on College Admissions Practices*

This literature review of cultural disparities will give educators a new lens through which to view test scores for African American and Latino students. The literature review has shown that SAT scores may not be the best predictor of academic performance in college. The differences in test scores may be attributed to social and cultural difference rather than their academic abilities. Higher education administrators may need to reform their current application review guidelines to incorporate a variety of criteria to evaluate more than only high school GPA and SAT scores.

Competition for admission to selective colleges has increased, leading to concern by students and families about the need for high test scores and test preparation courses to remain competitive. African American and Latino students historically and currently score lower on standardized tests, including the SAT, than their peers (Hacker, 1992). These lower test scores are a persistent barrier to pursuing postsecondary education for African American and Latino students, particularly those from low income and urban areas. As a result of this and other factors, African American and Latino students continue to lag considerably behind Whites and Asian Americans in college enrollment, academic achievement, and degree attainment (Wadpole et al., 2005).



## Discussion

### *Summary of Major Findings*

Across all research studies it is apparent that both a lack of academic preparation and social inequities can lead to low test scores of African American and Latino students. These students are often in school districts with limited rigorous course offerings, dilapidated school facilities, poverty, and little if any family support. This can lead to situations where students feel under-prepared and uninformed about their higher education opportunities including SAT requirements for many colleges and universities. In addition, the SAT has shown to predict first year college performance for White and Asian American students better than it predicts performance for African American and Latino students.

### *Limitations/Gaps in the Literature*

There is a lack of information on college acceptance rates for students from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is important to make the connection from high school and the SAT, to the college application and acceptance process. What is the acceptance rate for African American and Latino students going immediately to four year institutions from high school? Are these acceptance rates higher or lower than their White and Asian American peers? Do these disparities then go on to perpetuate the cultural and socioeconomic inequities in our society? Further research needs to be done to answer these important and influential questions.

*Implications for Future Research*

Future longitudinal research must be conducted over an extended period of time in order to compare SAT scores, college acceptance rates, college performance and, finally, graduation rates among students from different ethnicities. In addition, it would be valuable to investigate SAT scores from entering freshmen at two-year, four-year, public, private and independent institutions. Variables to consider in future studies should include overall academic performance and graduation rates of African American and Latino students.

An increasing number of colleges and universities are eliminating the SAT requirement as part of the application process. A study on how this has affected the diversity of their enrollment and the academic integrity of the institution would be useful deciding on the importance placed on standardized tests.

*Overall Significance of the Literature*

The more factual knowledge educators have, the more likely they are to adjust criteria to best serve the schools as well as the students. Educators are in need of information on cultural disparities in SAT scores to further their knowledge base when reviewing applications for university admission. The literature clearly shows that social and cultural inequities lead to lower tests scores for African American and Latino students, which may impact the admissions decision for a student and perpetuate those same inequalities in the greater world. Many colleges and universities have the ability to evaluate the whole person during the admissions process; this trend can be advanced by a movement to reduce the influence of standardized tests in college admissions. In

combination with an effort across the nation to improve family understanding of the college application process, this movement toward evaluating the whole person can be a meaningful factor in social justice issues for students from diverse backgrounds.

## Conclusion

The review of the literature reveals that the reasons for cultural disparities in SAT scores are related to academic preparation, and include: limited resources, such as a lack of honors or advanced placement courses, insufficient elective courses, ineffective guidance counselors (due to high volume), unsupported and under-developed teachers, substandard classrooms and facilities, as well as little at-home support and unfamiliarity with and intimidation by the college admissions process. Specifically, students are not given essential information about the college admissions process in their high school classrooms, including filing deadlines and the importance of SAT scores as part of the admissions process. In addition, the accepted use of test scores to predict college performance may not be accurate for these students.

In the American system of higher education, institutions exercise great autonomy in determining admissions standards and in making admissions decisions. Standardized tests are only one of the tools – a frequently used and therefore important tool – at their disposal in making these decisions. Standardized tests do not exist in a social vacuum. The way they are used embodies ideas about how society should work. Ultimately, each college is uniquely situated to resolve the debate over the fairness or usefulness of standardized tests for admission to its campus. Admission officers must therefore exercise due diligence in understanding how to properly interpret test scores. Colleges and universities must continue to conduct research that determines how or whether test scores, as well as other admission criteria, predict student performance at their institutions.

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