

Smyth, F. L. (1995, May 26). The validity of the S.A.T. for minority students [Letter to the editor]. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, B5.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The SAT's Validity for Minority Students

To the Editor:

In nearly every article of the special section "Affirmative Action on the Line" (April 28), admission and other officials at some of our most prestigious colleges dismissed the validity of Scholastic Assessment Test scores for minority students. Having just written a chapter of a National Association of College Admission Counselors' training manual called "Teaching Students About Standardized Testing in College Admission," I was particularly disappointed by these statements.

The S.A.T. *is* a useful predictive tool for minority students, and perpetuating notions to the contrary serves no one well, least of all students.

These dismissive comments generally came in the context of accounting for large differences between the average scores of black and white students at their institutions ("Under U.C.L.A.'s Elaborate System Race Makes a Big Difference," "The Special Preferences Are Not Limited to Blacks," and "Private Colleges Try to Keep a Low Profile").

Some blamed these differences on cultural bias inherent in the test. This false but popular idea is kept alive by the circulation of ancient anecdotes about questions requiring esoteric knowledge available only to affluent whites. Even if only one critic voices it whenever score differences between races are discussed before the media, such a flammable notion is sure to find its way into a sound bite. The truth is that for years now, the S.A.T. has been scrupulously combed for biased items and cannot be blamed for the large differences between some groups.

I agree with my friend John A. Blackburn, dean of admission at the University of Virginia, who attributed the difference between the average scores of black and whites in this country primarily to the legacy of discrimination against blacks that included blocked or limited access to quality education for generations. The gap between the scores has been closing, but the broad population effects of hundreds of years of educational privation are not undone in a few decades. If the S.A.T. and other standardized tests *didn't* reflect the impact of such disparate opportunity, they would be worthless measures.

In line with this intuitively logical relationship between the history of educational opportunity and aggregate test scores, volumes of research corroborate that test scores, in turn, are a useful -- though by no means perfect -- predictor of academic performance in college. That is, students who do well on the tests tend to do better in college courses than those who perform poorly on the tests.

Indeed, the S.A.T. recently has been shown to be a somewhat better predictor than high-school grades of performance in nearly all college courses. This relative predictive strength of the S.A.T., reported in 1994 by the College Board and based on 46,379 students at 45 colleges (including Dartmouth and U.C.L.A., whose officials were quoted by *The Chronicle* as discounting the usefulness of the S.A.T. for blacks), was even greater for black than for white students.

Furthermore, the S.A.T. *overpredicted* the performance of black students; *i.e.*, on average, black students did not fare quite as well in their college courses as their S.A.T. scores predicted. The case cannot be made, therefore, that the S.A.T. is unfair to black students.

This finding runs contrary to Mr. Blackburn's speculation that black students' performance at the University of Virginia is underpredicted by S.A.T. scores. He cited the high graduation rate of black students (80 per cent) in support of this idea. I agree that 80 per cent is an admirable rate (whether or not it is significantly different from the 93-per-cent U.Va. rate for whites), but a criterion as broad as graduation cannot be used to effectively assess the predictive validity of the S.A.T.

At most institutions, for example, a student needs only a 2.0 grade-point average to graduate, and research on students' choices of college courses indicates that less-able students choose courses and majors that are less academically demanding (Elliott & Strenta, 1988). In other words, simply looking at graduation rates washes out a great deal of variability across students' collegiate academic experiences.

Given, then, that the S.A.T. functions predictively for black students -- and other minority students -- essentially in the same way that it does for white students, what are the implications for affirmative-action policy? It means that a student, whether black or white, with a combined S.A.T. score 200 points below the mean at his or her college will tend to be at a competitive disadvantage academically. It means that the student will be less likely to stick with one of the harder majors at that school, typically found among the sciences.

For example, the student with a 1,050 combined S.A.T. score who aspires to an engineering degree, other factors being equal, will have a better chance of achieving that goal at a school where the mean S.A.T. is 1,000 than at one where the mean is 1,200. In considering affirmative action, therefore, admission officers at selective colleges may in some situations be faced with deliberations over potentially conflicting goals -- in this case, What is the best institution for the aspiring engineer above? This student may well succeed in graduating from either college, but what are the chances that it will be at the expense of his or her science major? Which is the more important outcome, a degree of any kind from the higher-S.A.T. -- and perhaps higher-prestige -- college, or the engineering degree from the lower-S.A.T. college? Is it appropriate for the answer to this question to vary depending on the student's race?

I urge admission deans at selective colleges to read College Board Report Number 93-1, "Student Group Differences in Predicting College Grades: Sex, Language, and Ethnic Groups.

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