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Provocative Theory on Merit

If you had to name the hot-button issues in admissions these days, they would almost certainly include affirmative action, standardized tests and rankings. Research released Tuesday <http://www.asanet.org/cs/press/view_news?pressrelease.id=143> in the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association combines those three issues in a way that challenges many assumptions.

The research argues that colleges with competitive admissions, motivated by the desire to improve their rankings, have put steadily increasing emphasis on SAT scores in admissions decisions. While this shift in emphasis was taking place, the colleges were also increasing their reliance on affirmative action in admissions, especially with regard to black students who, on average, do not do as well as other groups on the SAT. Further, the research argues, if elite colleges abandoned the SAT, they could achieve levels of diversity similar to what they have now — without using affirmative action in admissions decisions. Not only that, the research goes on to say, but doing so would not result in a diminution of student quality.

The study is appearing in the August issue of American Sociological Review and is based on a series of longitudinal databases that provide statistics on the qualifications and admissions records of applicants and enrolled students.

“I think that this at least needs to call our attention to questions about the importance of SAT scores and to ask whether it is justified,” said Sigal Alon, the lead author of the paper and an assistant professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University, in an interview. “The use of SAT is inflated and is not justified.” Alon’s co-author is Marta Tienda, a professor of demographic studies and sociology at Princeton University.

The findings are being praised as potentially significant by proponents of reform for college admissions. “This is very promising in that it brings together several issues,” said Lloyd Thacker, founder of the Education Conservancy. Thacker said that this backed his point about what he calls “ranksteering” in which colleges base decisions on the potential to improve their rankings. In this case, he said, “the worship of the SAT well beyond any educational value” was leading colleges to make decisions about admissions priorities that “are not serving educational values or purposes.”

A spokeswoman for the College Board said that officials there only learned of the study Tuesday afternoon and that no one was available to review or comment on it.

The authors of the new study use the phrase “shifting meritocracy” to describe the patterns they see in American higher education. Using two Education Department databases, they started by tracking the factors that were most important in getting in to colleges of different types. They based their analysis on statistical comparisons of students with otherwise similar qualifications except for in one area (changing that area for different comparisons). They wanted to find which factors could best predict whether a given student would be admitted to college based on actual decisions, not on what colleges say about how they make decisions.

Looking at the impact of class rank and SAT scores, they found that in a comparison for 1982 and 1992, they were of relatively equal value in predicting a given student’s admission to non-selective and moderately selective colleges. As selectivity increased, however, the SAT became more important both years, with the increase in the SAT’s importance being much more pronounced in 1992 — a shift that the sociologists attribute to the influence of rankings.

Then the authors did a similar analysis for the admission of black, Latino and Asian students — again asking the question of whether otherwise similar candidates were more or less likely to be admitted based on individual factors (in this case, race and ethnicity). Again, they found relatively similar impact of race on getting in to less selective institutions. But as selectivity increased, they found a key change. In 1982, Asian applicants were much more likely to get in. But by 1992, as the colleges had placed more emphasis on the SAT, the impact of being black was a key factor in getting in to selective colleges.

The view of Alon and Tienda is that colleges wanted to place more emphasis on the SAT to look good in U.S. News & World Report, but these same colleges didn't want to lose black enrollment so they increased the attention they paid to race in admissions during this period. Alon said that all available evidence suggests that all of these trends have only increased in the decade since 1992 — except in places where affirmative action has been banned, which in some cases has led to admissions shifts that have decreased the importance of the SAT.

The key finding, Alon said, is that if one accepts the need to place considerable emphasis on the SAT, “there is a tension between merit and diversity.” But the paper goes on to argue that this is a false choice. The two sociologists ran “counterfactual simulations” in which they use their findings to imagine an admissions world without the SAT or affirmative action. Running the numbers from the actual admissions years — and removing the additional emphasis that they found colleges gave for high SAT scores and for being a member of certain groups — they found that the two were balancing each other out, and that colleges need affirmative action to preserve current levels of diversity only if they stress the SAT.

Proponents of the SAT have historically argued that it is a necessary tool to help colleges evaluate students' readiness for college — given that high school quality is so variable in the United States. So the authors also try to explore whether the type of shift they imagine, doing away with the SAT and affirmative action, would lead to a decline in academic quality. The authors acknowledge that there are limits to their ability to use their approach to predict what would have happened with a different set of admissions priorities. But they cite data from the longitudinal surveys to show that during the period highly selective colleges were apparently paying more attention to the SAT, their graduation rates fell slightly.

The sociologists also focus on the impact of the “10 percent plan” in Texas, which was adopted following a court ruling barring affirmative action. Under the plan, students in the top 10 percent of their high school classes could be admitted to any public university — in effect making the SAT irrelevant. Students who enrolled this way at the University of Texas at Austin, the most competitive institution covered, not only performed as well academically, but in many cases were more likely to graduate, the study found. “Ignoring SAT scores does not have deleterious consequences for timely graduation likelihood,” the authors write.

In the interview Tuesday, Alon stressed that the conclusions of the research do not necessarily mean that the SAT or affirmative action should be abolished. She said her main belief was that the SAT has too much power in the admissions process. “If you are relying more on the SAT scores, then this immediately will help you climb in the rankings,” she said. “But not only will the obsession with SAT scores not promote diversity, but it will have the opposite effect.”

She also said that she was struck by the sequence in which colleges increased emphasis on some forms of affirmative action at the same time they increased emphasis on the SAT. For all the criticisms from opponents of affirmative action that the practice is related to identity politics or liberal academics, Alon said that the real motivating force may be something else altogether. “What we're saying is that affirmative action is the inevitable result of relying on test scores,” she said.

Alon said that she does not favor eliminating affirmative action.

“I would be happy if we didn't need affirmative action, but I don't think we have reached a situation where we can live without it. Equality of opportunity is still not here,” she said.

Bob Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest: National Center for Fair & Open Testing, a leading

critic of the SAT, said he was not surprised by the sociologists' findings. He said that colleges that abandon the SAT as a requirement "report a broader pool of applicants, reflecting more increased diversity of all sorts, including ethnicity, geography, social class and academic interests." At the same time, he said, the colleges that have students admitted without the SAT "perform just as well as those who submitted test scores."

Alon said that many wonder about why someone teaching at an Israel university would focus on the SAT and the demographics of American higher education. She is a scholar of social inequality and is an American citizen who was a postdoc at Princeton, so she has seen close up the admissions frenzy of American higher education. But she said that in terms of considering a hypothesis that might surprise others (like the idea that colleges might not need affirmative action if they ignored the SAT), Alon said that being away from that admissions frenzy might encourage different ideas.

"Maybe a little distance helps," she said.

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