

Do SAT Scores Help or Hurt in Decisions About Who Will Do Well in College?

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Every year, nervous high school juniors and seniors, clutching #2 pencils and armed with hours of test preparation, sit down and take the SAT. At their most basic, these tests focus on verbal, math, and writing ability, and performance on these tests has been linked to subsequent academic performance. As a result, college admissions teams use SAT scores along with other information, such as high school grades, in choosing their incoming freshman classes.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the SAT has been the subject of much scrutiny. Some researchers have asserted that the SAT isn't a good predictor of academic performance in college once socioeconomic status (SES) – usually measured as a combination of parents' education and family income – and high school grade point average are taken into account.

And some critics have argued that the SAT is fundamentally biased against students from low-SES backgrounds, acting as a barrier that prevents them from gaining admission to college.

“This was an eye catching claim,” says psychological scientist Paul Sackett of the University of Minnesota. “So we set out to obtain data to examine whether that claim really held up.”

Sackett and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota examined data from 143,606 students at 110 colleges and universities and contrasted their findings with data from the University of California system that had been studied in previous research.

Their findings are reported in a new article published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

They found that in all the datasets, both the SAT and high school grades contributed to predicting academic performance in college. And, contrary to previous research, taking parents' education and family income into account had little effect on the relationship between SAT scores and college performance. These findings suggest that the SAT remains a useful indicator for college admissions decisions.

Moreover, Sackett and his colleagues found that the SES of students actually enrolled in college was very similar to the SES of students who were applying to college. When they examined the data more closely and looked at the entire applicant pool, they found that fewer low-SES students were entering the college admissions process.

Based on these findings, it seems that low-SES students are not underrepresented in colleges because low SAT scores prevent them from gaining admission, but rather because fewer low-SES students apply to college in the first place.

“We view this as broadly relevant,” says Sackett. “Entrance tests such as the SAT receive a great deal of public scrutiny and it is important for all involved—students, parents, college officials—that accurate information about how the test functions be available.”