

Affirmative Action Myths and the Misuse of Test Scores in College Admissions

Norris M. Haynes, Ph.D.

The purpose of this article is not to reiterate, but to reinforce the strong and well-founded historical and socio-cultural bases and arguments for Affirmative Action, and to examine the validity of test scores, as the principal and pre-eminent basis for college admissions. The significant impact of inter-generational racism and discrimination, combined with lack of equitable opportunity in education, and in the workplace, cannot be denied. Certain minorities, and especially African Americans, have suffered greatly for generations, and continue to suffer today, from the impact of entrenched discriminatory practices in society, and from the effects of perceptions and actions driven by implicit bias. Indeed, it is the historical and continuing sacrifices and struggles for justice by African Americans that have made it even possible for immigrants, especially those of color, and minority groups of diverse types, to have a voice and a seat at the table. Ironically, it is unquestionable that the suffering and sacrifices and struggles of Black people in America, have made it even possible, for those minority groups, who have brought the lawsuit challenging affirmative action, to even have standing to bring the lawsuit. In a strange way, it is like these groups biting the metaphorical hand of liberation that has fed and continues to feed their liberties and freedoms. It is worth noting that among members of the racial-ethnic groups that have claimed discrimination due to affirmation action, there is some support for affirmative action by group members who consider affirmative action as important to addressing historical discrimination and an important social justice policy. The following is a snapshot of how Asian Americans feel about affirmative action:

“Among Asian adults who have heard of affirmative action, views do not vary significantly by nativity, though there are some differences by length of time that immigrants have lived in the United States. More than half of those born in the U.S. (56%) and about half of immigrants (52%) say affirmative action is a good thing. Among Asian immigrants, 12% of those who have lived in the U.S. for 10 years or less say it is a sad thing, as do 17% of immigrants who have been in the U.S. between 11 and 20 years. Half of Asian immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for 21 years or more say affirmative action is a good thing, while 25% say it is a bad thing. Another 25% say they don’t know if it’s good or bad. Assessments of affirmative action differ among Asian immigrants by their origins. Chinese immigrants who have heard the phrase (33%) are more likely to say affirmative action is a bad thing than Vietnamese (21%), Korean (21%), Filipino (18%) and Indian (12%) immigrants.”

The plaintiffs in the affirmative action cases, mainly used test performance and high school GPA, as the bases to claim discrimination in college and university admissions. Thus, focusing attention only on the historical truths and sociocultural realities for African Americans, limits the case that must be made against the arguments proffered by persons, such as those who brought the lawsuits against affirmative action, particularly against the field-leveling admissions practices of Harvard and the University of North Carolina. The decision by the conservative majority members on the Supreme Court ignored the historical and sociocultural arguments in favor of affirmative action and sided with the opposition. But, there is a compelling, scientific, and psychometrically rooted case, that can, and must be made, to underscore the misguidedness of the supreme court decision and this case is made in the sections that follow.

Empirically Established Limitations of Testing

Affirmative action, as a concept has come to connote, in the minds of many, unfair preferential treatment in favor of some minority groups and against others, [particularly White and Asian students, in college admissions. This misconstrued and demeaning view of affirmative action, assumes that the best and ultimate measures of students' academic competencies, are scores on tests, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test. (ACT), which purportedly assess cognitive capacity and college readiness. Scores on these tests are numbers, on these constructed measures, which contain sources of human error, and that cannot, and do not reflect the human variations of ability and creative capacities of individuals. The main arguments among those who have opposed affirmative action, have been focused on test score disparities, and GPA differences, among, and between college applicants, while neglecting the fact that these measures are flawed. imprecise, contain bias,

Studies indicate that the predictive validity of the SAT and ACT are not extraordinarily strong predictors of college performance. Yet, they are still very widely used. Allen and Robbins (2010), after analyzing data from over 23,000 students, reported a positive and significant correlation of 0.53 between ACT composite scores and college GPA. This means that only 25% of variance observed on GPA for the 23,000 students could be explained by ACT scores. Kobrin, Patterson, Shaw, Mattern, and Barbuti (2004) after analyzing data for more than 50,000 college students, reported correlations of 0.41 for the SAT suggesting that only 16% of the variance observed on GPA for these more than 50,000 students could be explained by SAT scores. The results for the ACT, in this study, were remarkably similar. These results show that the eminence given to test scores in college admissions is over amplified and unjustified.

The results on the predictive validity of the SAT and ACT for Black and Hispanic students specifically show that these tests fare even worse in terms of their psychometric strength. Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, and Kabin (2001) reported that the similar a correlation between SAT scores and first-year college GPA for Black and Hispanic students ($r = 0.34$) Camara, Echternacht, and Kimmel (2013) reported that the SAT is a stronger predictor for White students compared to Black and Hispanic students. It is important to note that in this regard, the State of California no longer uses standardized test scores for college admissions to its state universities and colleges. Beal (2022) noted:

“The decision by the Board of Trustees aligns with the California State University’s mission of access and our efforts to provide high-quality college degrees for students of all backgrounds,” says April Grommo, Ed.D., assistant vice chancellor for Enrollment Management Services. “We are eliminating a high-stakes test that can cause great stress on students and their families and does not add any additional predictive value over high school GPA. The CSU being test-free will better meet the needs of our future students.” (p,1)

High school GPA has been shown to be more strongly correlated with college GPA than standardized test scores, predicting much more strongly graduation from college. (Beneza 2021). In some studies, high school GPA has been found to have correlations as high as .58, when corrected for sample size, explaining about 34 percent of the variance in observed college performance (Westrick et al. 2015). A major issue with the use of high school GPA in college admissions is that many admissions officials attach value to GPAs based on high school characteristics, such as, perceived rigor, location, cost to attend, and private or public, all of which lead to reputational weighting of high school GPAs, taking us back to the problems of disadvantage for students who attend public high schools in urban school districts.

When one considers that standardized testing combined with the much stronger predictor, high school GPA explains less than about roughly only about 50% of the observed variance in college performance, and the built-in biases with each of those two admission assessment measures, one must be concerned about the fact that these two metrics are so very heavily favored and used in college admissions.

In addition to psychometric problems with tests and the limited values of test scores and grades from high-priced elite high schools, research suggests that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to perform better on these tests. It has been noted that the availability of, and access to, test preparation opportunities, and resources, the quality of educational experiences, as well as social and cultural capital that influence test scores, render tests invalid. Also, high school GPA, particularly from elite high schools, in admissions, is an additional source of significant bias. Other Studies have shown that differences in test performance between white and Asian students on one hand, and Black and Hispanic students on the other hand, reflect systemic inequities in educational opportunities and significant cultural bias in admission testing, based on factors such as language and test format.

One often wonders whether these standardized tests are more timed tests and tests of speed rather than tests of knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge. They seem to measure how quickly one can identify a supposedly correct response from among a set of similar alternatives in a multiple-choice format. How does this consider different styles of learning and demonstration of

learning? The College Board (2018) has acknowledged these biased factors and have sought to address them, unsuccessfully, in my view.

It is clear from empirical studies that college admission testing is overused and over hyped in determining college admissions. Even when combined with high school GPA, the amount of variance accounted for in college GPA is much less than 50 %. What then accounts for the much more than 50% of variance in college performance? The evidence would suggest that other important background and personal factors must be given much more consideration. Several factors, including socioeconomic background, educational opportunities, and non-academic qualities, also play a significant role in student success and should be considered in a holistic admissions process, one that does not assume that test scores have more predictive value than they do.

Highlighting Test Biasing Factors: Test Prep Access, Coaching, Practice and Cheating

Again, with regard to the over use of test scores in college admissions, it is critically important to acknowledge and emphasize that performance on tests are often influenced by coaching, practice and private instruction on test taking skills, for which many students who experience these test-taking advantages, pay hundreds and even thousands of dollars. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds most often cannot afford to spend thousands for test preparation, private tutors, and coaching. This disadvantages them and renders the use of admission tests an endorsement of privilege for the more affluent applications. Sophia Van Beek, (2020)

Wrote:

“It is no secret that wealthier students have an advantage on the SAT and ACT...

Many companies have emerged that offer one-on-one, personalized tutoring for the exams. Anthony-James Green, a private SAT tutor, wrote an article for Vox, admitting that he made \$1,000 an hour coaching the children of wealthy parents. Princeton Review, a private and popular test-prep company, claims that a student can get a 1,500+ on the SAT for a price of \$2,000. For \$150 an hour, Princeton Review advertises a minimum 250-point gain.” (p,1)

There is also the issue of cheating on these tests. Well planned and organized cheating schemes on college admissions tests are widespread among certain groups of students, thus limiting the validity of test results in college admissions. Cases of cheating have been uncovered over the years with none of these cases involving few Black educators, but no Black students, while some cheating schemes have implicated students from other racial/ethnic groups directly. One major headline, in 2017 read: “SAT Scores of Asian Students Cancelled Over Cheating” (<https://www.voanews.com/a/sat-scores-of-asian-students-cancelled-over-cheating/4009281.html>)

The Value of and Need for Holistic Admissions Assessment

Assessing student capabilities and potential cannot be limited to scores on inherently limited and flawed measures. To approximate the strongest approach to college admissions, the limitations of admissions testing must be acknowledged, and other sources of information must be included. Colleges and Universities are not to be regarded as institutionalized repositories of the highest possible test scores, and the best test takers among students, many of whom have paid

handsomely for test preparation and have been coached. Unfortunately, too, cheating on standardized tests continues to be a source of concern.

Colleges and Universities look for creativity, resilience, determination, leadership, community involvement among other sources of variation among student populations. To argue that one group is discriminated against because many in that group have the highest test scores and GPAs and are not admitted, is to misunderstand what colleges and universities are and should be about.

Combating the Affirmative Action Stereotype

It is important for the public to understand, that to assume that all Black, Hispanic, and non-Asian minority students, who attend Ivy league and other top ranked Universities, have been admitted not necessarily because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds. There are many of these students who score just as well, and even higher on admissions tests, as their white and Asian counterparts, without the benefit of the test biasing factors, identified above. And even among those who may not score within the highest range of scores, they bring to college, and university experiences, attributes and assets that enrich the institutions themselves, and the students who attend those institutions.

Many individuals also neglect to mention that even when other factors such as race, gender, life experiences, are considered in admission decisions, minimum test score ranges are used to screen out or screen in applicants. In my view, even this approach is questionable because it assumes the supremacy of test scores over perhaps more compelling personal factors.

Why Target Race

Why the targeting of race for attack by some, and not the targeting of other demographic factors that are included in the college admissions process? Colleges and universities consider a range of demographic and personal factors that include gender, legacy, nationality, geographic region, athletic ability, military service, and others. So why is race the one factor that has been challenged, and that the supreme court considers. the inclusion of which, to be unconstitutional. The answer, I believe, is inherent in the challenge itself. Call it what one would, but the targeting of the race factor, and the overlooking of other factors, can only be construed as a continuation of the struggle of Black people for social and educational equity in education and in other areas of American life.

A Note on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

As of 2021, the approximately 99 historically black colleges and universities, 50 public and 49 private, served approximately 287, 000 students, approximately 25% of whom are non-Black students. Among these predominantly Black students are talented, creative, intellectually powerful individuals who are poised to impact the world in significant ways. While it is true that HBCUs do not enjoy the substantively high endowment levels of many non-HBCUs, they are no less rigorous, demanding and academically robust than other colleges and Universities. They provide rich, deep cultural experiences, that often are not provided at other colleges and universities. They are places where Black students do not, and have not ever, had to be concerned about being seen, and labeled as beneficiaries of affirmative action. Being at an HBCU does not carry the burden of stereotyping, and being seen as gaining admission, based on

preferential treatment, and not based on merit. This is not and should not be an argument against affirmative action, but one of many strong endorsements for selecting an HBCU.

Summary

Restorative justice has come to be widely acknowledged in psychology, as a form of redemptive action, to make right a wrong that one has done to others. It not only restores the disturbed balance that one's actions or inactions caused in the lives and experiences of those impacted, but it restores to the one causing the imbalance and disturbance, a sense of responsibility for, and ownership of, one's actions, and sets one on a path to corrected behavior and wholeness.

Affirmative action, I believe, has been a form of restorative justice. A nation taking responsibility for, and ownership of the wrongs done to African Americans, in denying equal opportunity in education, as in many other aspects of life. The persons who brought the lawsuit against affirmative action, and the conservative justices on the supreme court, who essentially gutted affirmative action, have denied continuing restorative justice to African Americans,

The historical and sociocultural arguments for maintaining affirmation action are bolstered by measurement science, and psychometrically sound arguments. Test scores and high school GPAs, mostly from high-priced, elite high schools, are not infallible valid bases, only on which to base college admissions. They do not predict college performance with compelling accuracy, and certainly do not embody the essential and important dimensions of human variation in talent, creativity, cultural richness, and formative life experiences, to which all colleges and universities should aspire. Having higher grades and higher test scores than other applicants does not automatically mean that someone is a more qualified candidate than other

applicants for university admission. Within and between group differences on multiple factors are important sources of social enrichment, and not indicators of comparative inferiority between and among people.

Gordon (1992), in addressing human diversity, multiculturalism and coexistence in a pluralistic society wrote:

"Questions concerning the appropriate treatment of diverse human experiences, identities, and perspectives in the curricula of our schools have achieved prominence in the debates over curriculum development in recent years. As manifestations of diversity in human characteristics have become more obvious and are experienced as being ubiquitous in the lives of all members of society, the facts of human diversity and cultural pluralism have become a significant source of social concern." (P. 405)

College and University rankings that rely mainly on average test scores of the in-coming freshman class, feed the mythology that test scores are best barometers of student quality and institutional greatness and desirability. This practice is wrong and should be discontinued. What makes a college or university special and great, is having a mission with a purpose that seeks to achieve a society where there is justice and equity for all, through a rich, strong, and robust educational experience. The path that the college or university takes to achieve this mission must be informed by history, socio-cultural realities and by measurement science. It is irrefutable that college admissions using holistic assessments, are indispensable to helping colleges and universities achieve the mission of contributing to a fair and just society.

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