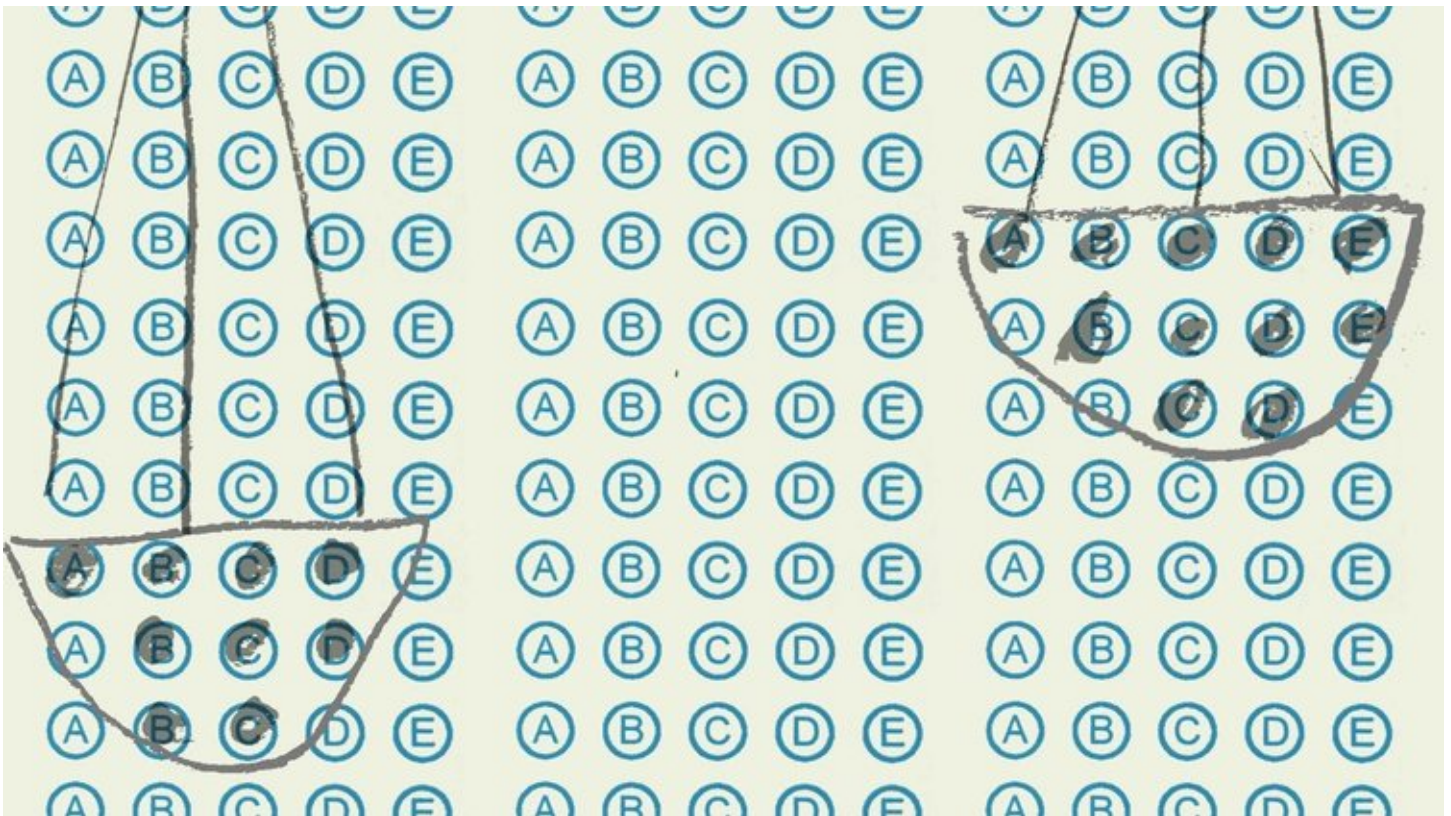


IDEAS

# The SAT Isn't What's Unfair

MIT brings back a test that, despite its reputation, helps low-income students in an inequitable society.

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**About the author:** Kathryn Paige Harden is a clinical-psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *The Genetic Lottery: Why DNA Matters for Social Equality*.

Critics of standardized tests have had plenty of reasons to celebrate lately. More than three-quarters of colleges are not requiring the SAT or the ACT for admission this fall, an all-time high, and more than 400 Ph.D. programs have dropped the GRE, up from a mere handful a few years ago. MIT's announcement on Monday that it is reinstating a testing requirement for fall 2023 admissions was a major departure from these recent trends. Just as striking, amid the widespread perception of standardized testing as an engine of inequality, was MIT's rationale: "Not having SATs/ACT scores to consider," MIT's dean of admissions, Stu Schmill, wrote, "tends to *raise* socioeconomic barriers to demonstrating readiness for our education." Dropping the SAT, it turns out, actually hurts low-income students, rather than helping them.

MIT's conclusion is counterintuitive because students from richer families, on average, score higher on the SAT and other standardized tests than students from poorer ones. The correlation between family background and SAT performance is from about .25 to .40—that is, meaningful but far from perfect. Still, it's strong enough that some researchers dismiss standardized tests as nothing more than a proxy for asking, "Are you rich?" (The ACT measures roughly the same skills as the more widely used SAT, and the arguments for and against both tests are similar.)

But the income-related disparities we see in SAT scores are not evidence of an unfair *test*. They are evidence of an unfair *society*. The test measures differences in academic preparedness, including the ability to write a clear sentence, to understand a complex passage, and to solve a mathematical problem. The SAT doesn't *create* inequalities in these academic skills. It *reveals* them. Throwing the measurement away doesn't remedy underlying injustices in children's academic opportunities, any more than throwing a thermometer away changes the weather.

Jeff Selingo: The SAT and the ACT will probably survive the pandemic—thanks to students

The higher scores of richer students are not due, as is commonly assumed, to richer students' ability to "game" the SAT with expensive test prep. Despite the marketing claims of test-prep companies, gains from test prep are modest at best. Instead, richer students' higher scores reflect a problem that is much more durable and pervasive:

These students are the beneficiaries of lifelong inequalities in opportunities to learn. As developmental scientists have long documented, poverty and racism can harm children's learning in countless ways, even to the point of affecting their brain development. In the Developmental Behavior Genetics Lab at the University of Texas, my colleagues and I have found that children as young as 2 years old from low-income families differ from their better-off counterparts in their performance on standardized tests.

No one should be surprised that, at age 18, students who have enjoyed a lifetime of material, social, and cultural advantages perform better on tests of academic skills that those advantages facilitate. And these skills actually matter more for students' performance in college than how wealthy their families are. In large-scale studies of college admissions, higher socioeconomic status is not associated with better grades after controlling for SAT scores, but SAT scores remain predictive of better grades after controlling for family background.

Getting rid of testing does not get rid of the inequitable policies that systematically deprive some children and adolescents of clean water, nutritious food, green space, safe neighborhoods, sparkling classrooms, stimulating teachers, and enriching cultural experiences. Getting rid of testing just deprives us of a valuable tool for seeing the results of our current policies. Indeed, it is ironic that the coronavirus pandemic accelerated the movement to drop standardized-testing requirements in higher education, because the course of the U.S. pandemic offers a clear lesson: Without tests, the problem is harder to see and harder to solve.

Richer students don't just get better SAT scores. They also tend to outperform on everything else that an admissions committee would use to select students. Personal essays? Their style and content are more strongly correlated with family income than SAT scores are. Recommendation letters? They are subject to teachers' classist and racist biases, and even knowing how to request the letters requires significant social capital.

James S. Murphy: College admissions are still unfair

Many critics of standardized tests urge college-admissions officers to focus on

applicants' high-school performance. But low-income students also have worse grades, on average, particularly if their parents do not have a college degree. Moreover, admissions officers commonly consider not only grades but which classes students have taken. Access to advanced coursework is highly stratified: Less than half of American high schools, for instance, offer calculus. And parents know firsthand that their children's sports teams, volunteer positions, study-abroad trips, and summer internships require substantial investments of time and money. In a society characterized by pervasive inequalities in opportunities to learn, looking for a measure of a student's "merit" that is somehow unencumbered by unearned advantages is a fool's errand.

Dropping any admissions requirement is necessarily a decision to weigh other factors more heavily. If other student characteristics, such as essays, recommendations, and coursework, are more strongly correlated with family income than test scores are, then dropping test scores actually tilts the playing field *even more* in favor of richer students. This was the situation that MIT found itself in after it suspended its SAT requirement in 2020. And other schools that dropped standardized tests during the pandemic will soon find themselves in the same straits.

In its announcement, MIT emphasized the uniqueness of its demanding undergraduate curriculum, which involves two semesters of calculus for all students. So perhaps the utility of standardized tests is confined to an elite institution intensely focused on math and science. But studies of other types of undergraduate institutions and other educational stages have also found that standardized testing improves the representation of low-income students, because testing replaces more flawed indicators of student readiness. A K–12 school district in Florida that made standardized testing universal among its second-grade students saw a substantial jump in the number of low-income and Black students in its gifted-and-talented program. Before the switch to universal testing, admission to the gifted-and-talented program depended strongly on teacher referrals—subjective assessments that, like recommendation letters for college applicants, may be informed by educators' biases.

Similarly, when the state of Michigan required every high-school student to take the ACT or the SAT, it saw an increase in the number of low-income students attending four-year colleges. These studies suggest that the best policy might actually be to

facilitate more high-school students taking the SAT, not abandon it entirely. Standardized testing, inequitable as it might be, is more equitable than any other criterion.

There are real barriers to the fair use of standardized testing that educators and policy makers should address. Currently, just signing up for the SAT or the GRE is prohibitively expensive for many students, as are college-application fees, and many students might not even consider taking the test. Free, accessible, universal testing (and access to test prep) would help dismantle these barriers.

Ultimately, though, Americans must recognize that improving admissions policies at elite four-year colleges is woefully insufficient to address the larger problem of social inequality. An exclusive focus on who “deserves” to win the admissions competition neglects important questions about the *stakes* of the competition: What do we owe, as a society, to those students who fail to win the academic rat race, or indeed have no interest in competing in the first place?

After all, fewer than half of American high schoolers enroll in four-year colleges. In recent years, life has gotten worse, in nearly every possible way, for people without a college degree in the U.S. They make less money, report more pain and worse health, and die younger than they did in previous generations. Participation in higher education has become a bottleneck in American society. Standardized testing can make passage through that bottleneck fairer, but we must also consider how to make the bottleneck wider, and provide people with more pluralistic opportunities to build a good life—regardless of whether they get into MIT.