The Civil Rights Project
Proyecto Derechos Civiles

June 8, 2023

New UCLA Analysis Reconsiders the Role of College Admissions Testing

The petitions by Students for Fair Admissions challenging Harvard and the University of North Carolina admission policies implies that admission rates should depend more heavily on test scores and high school grades. But as leaders of colleges and universities await the ruling of the United States Supreme Court on the Affirmative Action cases under consideration, a new analysis examines the role of standardized testing in college admissions, raising among other questions, whether the concept of merit in admissions should continue to be determined by test scores and other achievement metrics.

The commissioned report, "The Role of Standardized Tests in College Admissions," is written by Rebecca Zwick, a noted researcher on college admissions, and published by the Civil Rights Project/*Proyecto Derechos Civiles* at UCLA. Acknowledging concerns over the use of standardized test scores for admission as an impediment to campus diversity, an increasing focus on societal inequities, and changes to admissions testing policies fueled by the pandemic, the study reconsiders the role of college admissions testing in society. The analysis summarizes the history of college admissions in the U.S., describes the college admissions tests used today and their role in the admissions process, and explores their advantages and limitations and the ongoing debates about their fairness. The paper also discusses the future of admissions and admissions testing, ending with a discussion of the concept of meritocracy as it applies to college admissions.

The paper also offers suggestions for guidelines related to the use of standardized admissions tests in the future, including a clear rationale and a thorough institutional study of the likely impact, clear information to applicants about the criteria used in admissions, and, if test scores are to be used, that they be evaluated in context. The author also suggests steps should be taken to reduce the frenzy surrounding test scores, such as excluding information about an institution's test score distributions from college rankings.

Importantly, the paper suggests considering definitions of meritocracy that deemphasize test scores and other achievement metrics. The paper concludes by noting the work of the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, a philosopher and economist, who proposes a radical definition of meritocracy, arguing that merit should reside not in the person but in societal value, and the designation should be applied to actions that promote a valued societal goal. As Civil Rights Project Co-director Patricia Gándara notes, Sen's perspective on meritocracy serves as a reminder that broadening access to higher education can itself be a meritocratic act.

"The Role of Standardized Tests in College Admissions," is part of a new series of research papers, *A Civil Rights Agenda for the Next Quarter Century*, commissioned and published by the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civile at UCLA. The full report and executive summary can be found on the

website of the Civil Rights Project at: https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/college-access/admissions/the-role-of-standardized-tests-in-college-admissions.

by John McDonald
For the Civil Rights Project

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Contacts:
Laurie Russman, Civil Rights Project
russman@gseis.ucla.edu
or
John McDonald, Ed&IS
jmcdonald@gseis.ucla.edu