

The Role of Standardized Tests in College Admissions

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Executive Summary

Over the last decade, colleges and universities have become increasingly concerned that requiring standardized test scores for admission is an impediment to campus diversity, and these objections have grown with the recent focus on societal inequities. In addition, the pandemic led to the cancellation of test administrations, which, in turn, caused many institutions to eliminate admissions test requirements. These developments present an opportunity to reconsider the role of college admissions testing.

Although admissions tests measure skills needed in college work and are useful in predicting college performance, the substantial test-score differences among ethnic and socioeconomic groups are a cause for concern. Asian and White test takers score higher, on average, than Black, Hispanic, and Native American test takers, and test takers from higher-income families perform better than lower-income test takers. While group differences do not in themselves demonstrate that a test is biased or unfair, a heavy emphasis on test scores in admissions decisions will result in lower selection rates for candidates who are Black, Hispanic, or Native American or are from low-income families.

These concerns have led to an increased emphasis on high school grades and personal characteristics in the admissions process. Grades are predictive of college success and reflect four years of academic accomplishments. However, grading stringency varies over high schools, courses, and teachers and over time. Grades can also be influenced by extraneous factors such as a student's socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnicity. In the absence of tests, grades could be vulnerable to

lobbying efforts by parents and other inflationary pressures. Also, the patterns of group differences in grades are typically similar to, though less pronounced than, the patterns observed for test scores.

In recent years, the possibility of using personal characteristics as admissions criteria has drawn renewed interest. However, measuring potentially useful factors such as conscientiousness and grit accurately and without bias is challenging, and findings about the predictive value of personal characteristics have been mixed.

What guidelines can be offered for the use of standardized admissions tests in the future?

- Any proposed use of an admissions test should be accompanied by a clear rationale and a thorough institutional study of the likely impact. The same type of scrutiny should be applied to other potential admissions criteria and to the effects of alternative ways of weighting and combining criteria. Research results should be made public to the degree possible.
- Institutions should provide clear information to applicants about the criteria used in admissions and how they are weighted and combined. In the case of test-optional policies, applicants should be provided with enough information to allow them to determine whether or not it is in their best interest to submit scores.
- If test scores are to be used in admissions decisions, they should be evaluated in context. The resources available to the applicant and the applicant's high school should be considered. High-quality in-person test preparation should be made available to all applicants at little or no cost.
- Steps should be taken to reduce the frenzy surrounding test scores. One small step would be to exclude information about institutions' test score distributions from college rankings. The utility of this information is questionable in any case, given the differences across institutions in test requirements.

Finally, it is worth considering definitions of meritocracy that deemphasize test scores and other achievement metrics. Contrary to the idea of meritocracy as typically interpreted in the

admissions setting, the most accomplished applicants cannot be assumed to be the most deserving of admission. Admissions criteria must flow from an institution's admissions policy, and ultimately, its mission. Rather than seeking students with the most distinguished academic records, a school might seek those that best represent the state from a demographic perspective or those that will benefit most from the curriculum. Going a step further, the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues that an action is meritocratic if it promotes a valued societal goal. Applying Sen's idea to admissions, a policy that gave preference to students from lower-income backgrounds would be considered meritocratic if the university's mission included the reduction of economic inequality in our society. Sen's perspective on meritocracy serves to remind us that broadening access to higher education can itself be a meritocratic act.