

The Geography of Privilege

Peter Sacks

Test scores, while exceedingly good at boosting the college admissions opportunities of the affluent and well educated, are vastly overrated as predictors of later academic achievement.

Some of America's best public universities are in the midst of a small revolution, trying to find broader and fairer definitions of merit in deciding who gets admitted to top colleges. The relatively privileged classes who have long benefitted from the old rules of the game, governed by gatekeeping tests like the SAT, are reacting to this transformation in predictable ways.

The looming scandal over the new undergraduate admissions process at the University of California at Berkeley typifies the backlash. John J. Moores, the chairman of the UC Board of Regents and owner of the San Diego Padres, completed a 159-page "confidential" report (that he apparently leaked to the *Los Angeles Times*), in which he found that nearly 400 students admitted to Berkeley in 2002 had scored between 600 and 1000 on the SAT I, which, as the newspaper put it, was "far below" the 1337 average SAT I score for those admitted last year. "It is outrageous," Moores said. "They don't have any business going to Berkeley."

What's worse, according to Moores, Berkeley rejected hundreds of applicants with very high SAT scores of 1500 and above. Saying he completed the report after hearing many complaints from "parents" about Berkeley's new admissions policy, Moores was described in the *Los Angeles Times* (2003) as being "shocked" by these findings. "I just don't see any objective standards," he told the newspaper, which conveyed the smell of scandal under the headline: "Study finds hundreds of highly qualified applicants were rejected in favor of freshmen who were 'marginally academically qualified' "

The Backlash

The supposed villain in all this is what's known as "Comprehensive Review," the new admissions policy that the UC system adopted in 2001 in the wake of Proposition 209, which prohibited state universities



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from using race as a factor in college admissions. Unlike the old admissions system that relied on a numerical index of test scores and grades to rather mechanically sort applicants, admissions officials now consider a full range of factors that paint a portrait of a young person's academic promise.

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In fact, GPAs and test scores still top the list of 14 criteria in the new process, but the difficulty of high school courses, one's talents and achievements on real-world projects, and the obstacles of poverty and social class one overcomes are now integral to the new selection method. Still, nobody is admitted to the highly selective Berkeley campus or to any of the other eight UC undergraduate campuses who isn't "UC-eligible"; that is, academically among the top 12.5% of California high school students, as required by UC policy.

No matter, though. The widespread impression conveyed by Moores's report and its subsequent coverage in the media is that comprehensive review is a sham, allowing "unqualified" students, particularly students of color, to gain admission to California's most prestigious public university.

The backlash against comprehensive review brings together an unlikely but potent coalition of comprehensive review bashers. For UC Regent Ward Connerly and other foes of affirmative action, who note that most of the nearly 400 "unqualified" students were minorities, comprehensive review amounts to a bureaucratic attempt to circumvent the state's ban on affirmative action. For the upper-middle class parents who've complained to Moores about their high-scoring kids not getting into UC Berkeley, comprehensive review is a challenge to a virtual entitlement.

For both constituencies, the evolving views about merit at UC Berkeley and other University of

California campuses represent an unprecedented attack on academic standards. While not perfect, they believe, selection methods that put much faith in test scores were objective and fair. Comprehensive review, its critics say, is a fancy name for mushy standards and subjectivity and patently unfair to the clearly more qualified students who clearly do better than others on clearly unquestionable measures like standardized tests.

Thus, on its myopic face, the case against comprehensive review at the University of California and other top public universities reflects the prevailing zeitgeist about merit. And that's the problem. Critics of admissions reform at UC Berkeley and other selective public universities are tapping into an entrenched ideology about merit going back to the invention of the IQ testing and the SAT itself. As a direct descendent of intelligence tests developed at the turn of the last century, the first "Scholastic Aptitude Test" would purportedly allow the society's intellectual cream to rise and be identified for selection to the best colleges.

It so happened then—and continues to this day—that the lion's share of society's academic elite selected on this self-serving basis emerge from affluent and highly educated families. In the days of Lewis Terman and Charles Brigham, early American mental testers who paved the way for widespread use of intelligence testing and aptitude testing for college study, that era's recent American immigrants such as Italians, Jews and Poles were labeled feeble minded idiots due to their poor performance on the IQ tests of the day. Now, in these slightly more polite times, their counterparts in poor urban neighborhoods and the rough edges of suburbia "don't have any business going to Berkeley," as Moores would say.

Entrenched Ideology

In fact, affluence and privilege rule in the American "meritocracy." Consider the relationship between SAT scores and parent education levels. A high school senior bound for college in 2002 whose parents did not graduate from high school could expect to score fully 170 points below the national average on the SAT, according to the College Board. By contrast, a student whose mother or father had a graduate degree could expect to outscore the na-

tional average by 106 points (College Board 2002). Affluent students with family incomes of \$100,000 or more are likely to outscore those of modest means (family incomes of \$30,000-\$40,000) by nearly 160 points on the SAT.

A widespread cultural belief in mental test scores as a proxy for real-world merit, combined with such powerful relationships between SAT scores and social class, have only served to reproduce harsh class disparities to educational access. The Century Foundation, for instance, released a report in 2003 concluding that just 3% of students admitted to the nation's most selective 146 colleges came from families of modest social and economic backgrounds. By contrast, fully 74% of students admitted to these highly competitive colleges came from the top quarter of the nation's social and economic strata (Carnevale and Rose 2003, 11).

Like elite colleges nationally, access to the public University of California has also been highly dependent on students' class backgrounds, according to a new study by UC Berkeley sociologists Isaac Martin, Jerome Karabel, and Los Angeles attorney Sean Jaquez (2003). Indeed, the researchers found that class appeared even to trump race and ethnicity with respect to one's chances of being admitted to the prestigious UC system.

For example, a single high school measure—the proportion of a school's parents with graduate degrees—accounted for almost 70% of the differences in the rates that California schools sent graduates to the UC system in 1999, the study found. Similarly, the percentage of high school parents with only a high school diploma was strongly negatively associated with schools' admission rates to UC. This measure, in fact, accounted for more than 40% of the differences in schools' admission rates to the UC system.

The geography of privilege and access to California's most desired public university is equally pronounced. Affluent, well-educated parents congregate in certain top public and private “feeder” schools that send disproportionate numbers of graduates to the UC system. Among the state's top 50 public and private feeder schools, predominately in affluent suburbs of Los Angeles and San Francisco, admission rates to UC ranged from a highly respectable 40% to an eye-popping 80%, according to

Karabel and his co-authors. But even those statistics under-represent the advantages accorded to privilege because many graduates of these schools are admitted to even more elite colleges and universities beyond California. In contrast, the bottom 25 public schools that sent graduates to UC in

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1999—schools heavily stacked with low-income and minority students—saw UC admission rates of no higher than 2.3% of their graduates (Martin, Karabel, and Jaquez 2003, 140).

Overrated Predictors

Even a cursory glance at the research literature on testing suggests it's a canard for Moores and his allies to assert that diminishing the importance of test scores will lead to the academic ruin of our great public universities. Consider another selective public institution, the University of Texas at Austin. For all the critics' suggested faults of the State of Texas's “Top 10 Percent Plan” (and similar ones in other states), which guarantees admission to state colleges for those graduating in the top 10% of his or her high school class regardless of test scores, academic quality has continued to thrive under the Texas plan.

How? For the simple reason that test scores, while exceedingly good at boosting the opportunities of the affluent and well educated, are vastly overrated as predictors of later academic achievement. For example, consider a recent cohort of University of Texas at Austin freshmen admitted under the top 10 Percent law who earned first-year GPAs of 2.87 and had SAT scores averaging about 1000. Their GPAs equalled the academic performance of non-Top 10 Percent students with SAT scores averaging 200

points higher. As University of Texas researchers have found repeatedly in five years of analyzing the law's impact, the same relationships hold for virtually all SAT and GPA intervals.

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The University of California's own research has shown that the SAT I—the widely used “reasoning” test of math and verbal abilities—was the least predictive indicator of freshman academic success, ranking behind high school grades and scores on the so-called “SAT II” achievement tests in various academic subjects. An even more compelling finding in support of comprehensive review, the UC researchers found that the predictive power of high school grades actually improved after family income and education were factored in, while the predictive power of SAT I scores declined sharply when socio-economic factors were considered (Geiser and Studley 2001, 9).

Opening Access

All of this explains why comprehensive review is providing University of California admissions officials with the tools to open up the nation's most selective public university to a far broader number of residents than the old rules would permit. The University of California at San Diego is a remarkable example. In 2001, about one-quarter of the campus's admitted class were the first in their families to attend college. Now, fully one-third are first-generation college students. Two years ago, 15 percent of those admitted to UC San Diego came from low-income families; now, almost 20 percent do. Even more remarkable, just 12 percent of students two years ago attended “low-performing” high schools, most often in poor neighborhoods. Now, fully 17% of the admitted class at UC-San Diego attended such schools (University of California 2003, 7).

While Moores suggests his research has uncovered a scandalous system that must be fixed, in reality the University of California and other selective public universities may have little choice but to continue down the current path of admissions reform. In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's 6-3 ruling in June 2003 striking down the undergraduate admissions policy at the University of Michigan, the University of California and similar universities must make their admissions systems even less formulaic than the numbers-driven schemes of the past. Recalling Justice Powell's language in the 1978 Bakke decision, the Court's latest majority opinion emphasized “the importance of considering each particular applicant as an individual, assessing all of the qualities that individual possesses, and in turn, evaluating that individual's ability to contribute to the unique setting of higher education.”

Further, UC Berkeley has the additional burden of adhering to the terms of a recently settled class-action lawsuit filed by several civil rights organizations, including the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the ACLU, on behalf of several minority applicants who were denied admission to Berkeley, despite their stellar performance in and out of the classroom. The suit, which has gone largely under the radar since it was filed 1999 (Castaneda et al. v. Regents of the University of California et al. 2003), alleged that UC Berkeley admitted nearly half of white applicants with GPAs of 4.0 and higher but less than 40% of Black and Hispanic applicants with those grades—owing to Berkeley's excessive reliance on SAT scores. Berkeley's recent admissions reforms, including comprehensive review, resolved most issues of the suit, but according to the settlement, the civil rights groups will be closely monitoring UC Berkeley's progress.

As most progressive policymakers in public higher education are beginning to understand, the alternative to comprehensive review, or something akin to it, is to permit high-speed computers to do the work of admissions professionals. It's a neat and tidy world in which young people are easily categorized and sorted by a numerical index of their SAT scores and GPAs. When critics lash out against the “unqualified,” i.e., the unwashed hordes with low SAT scores getting into prestigious UC Berkeley

and other selective public colleges, that's the world they wish a return to. It's certainly the world that a young man from Los Angeles named Daniel Wurangian encountered when he wanted to apply for admission to the U. S. Naval Academy. As a student in Granada Hills, Wurangian achieved a class ranking of 24th of 500 graduates, earning a GPA of 3.64. And he'd demonstrated a remarkable affinity for military leadership, in four years advancing to the highest-ranking officer in his junior ROTC program. Based on his real-world accomplishments, Wurangian earned his Congressman's nomination to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Nevertheless, Wurangian's dream of becoming a Naval aviator was quashed when the Naval Academy informed him that it would not consider his application because his SAT score of 1000 fell 100 points below the Academy's minimum cut-off score of 1100—a difference so small as to be statistically and academically meaningless. Bureaucratically convenient, without question. But when dreams are ruined for 100-point differences on standardized

tests—the sorting tool of choice for the privileged classes—a return to such formulas seems a crummy way to run meritocracy.

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