

Meeting of the Regents of the University of California

Standardized College Entrance Exams: Current Uses and Academic Perspectives on Use

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**Testimony by
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As Prepared

I'm honored to speak with you today. My name is Jesse Rothstein. I am a professor of public policy and economics at UC Berkeley and a labor economist. I have studied test scores and diversity in admissions for many years. My very first paper, published in 2004, examined the role of SAT scores in University of California admissions.

I want to make four points today.

First, the Task Force report reads the evidence very selectively, and gets a lot wrong. I'll mention two examples here. The report concludes that grading standards are highly unequal across high schools, preventing the use of GPAs as a primary determinant of admissions, and that UC admissions "compensate" for differences in SAT scores across racial groups.

Neither of these is supported by the evidence. While there is some variation in grading standards across schools, it is minor, and there is plenty of variation within schools to identify those best prepared.

If there were differences in grading standards across schools, we'd expect comparisons of high school GPAs of students from different high schools to be largely uninformative about student preparedness. The evidence shows that GPAs are as useful for comparing students from different high schools as they are for comparing students who attend the same schools. Evidently, the standards are not so wildly different in different high schools. And the data in the task force's own report clearly indicates that campus admissions are *not* compensating for SAT gaps.

Second, the report leans heavily on the predictive validity of SAT scores for first-year students' grades. While we definitely want to admit students prepared to succeed, among students who are, predictive validity cannot be a primary goal of admissions.

The reason is that students from more advantaged backgrounds transition more easily to college than students from disadvantaged backgrounds, earning higher grades, so anything that is correlated with student advantage has high predictive validity. If we tested it, we'd find that experience playing lacrosse has high predictive validity – that lacrosse players get good grades.

In my study of UC admissions, I showed that the SAT plays a similar role to lacrosse experience: SAT scores, like lacrosse experience, are very efficient at identifying students from advantaged backgrounds, and for predicting that those students, on average, will get good grades. SAT scores are much less useful for predicting performance of students from similar backgrounds – when two students from similarly advantaged backgrounds get different SAT scores, that doesn't tell us much about which will do better in college.

The same is not true for the GPA, which predicts just as well within groups as between, so doesn't seem to be disproportionately measuring student background.

The effect is that SAT scores put an apparently meritocratic face on preferences for students from wealthy, white high schools. If we want UC's students to reflect California's diversity, we have to recognize that predicted performance can't be the lodestar of our process for selecting them.

Third, don't be confused by UC's distinction between admissions and eligibility. Since 2011, being eligible, whether in the statewide or local context, gets you an admission offer at UC Merced, with no impact on admission to any other campus.

UC Merced is already our most diverse campus, and the challenge is to ensure that admissions are fair at the other campuses. Without changes in those campus's admissions practices, an expansion of ELC that provides a non-test-based route to eligibility does nothing to diversify them. Rather, we could create a non-test-based route to admission at each UC campus, for example through a campus-level version of ELC.

Texas's Ten Percent Plan does this successfully. In Texas, students in the top of their high school classes are guaranteed admission to the state's flagship campus, UT Austin, regardless of their test scores. This program has been successful at bringing in students prepared to succeed, and California could do this too.

Finally, UC is part of California's broader public education system. SAT-based admissions undermine the integrity of K-12 teaching and standards. The SAT becomes a separate compass point for students – an external set of criteria – that conflicts with the state's own K-12 standards and curriculum.

An admissions policy that used criteria aligned with the state's K-12 standards, like the SBAC, would support K-12 schools in pursuing those standards. It would also help level the playing field: Students would be rewarded for learning the material we are trying to teach them, rather than for having the resources to buy tutoring in test-taking skills.

There are many ways to design a better admissions process than the one we have now. In my view, the evidence indicates that the SAT plays a uniquely harmful role, and I would encourage you to consider alternatives that reduce it – whether by adopting an alternative test that is a better fit for California, by creating non-test routes to admissions, or both.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you.