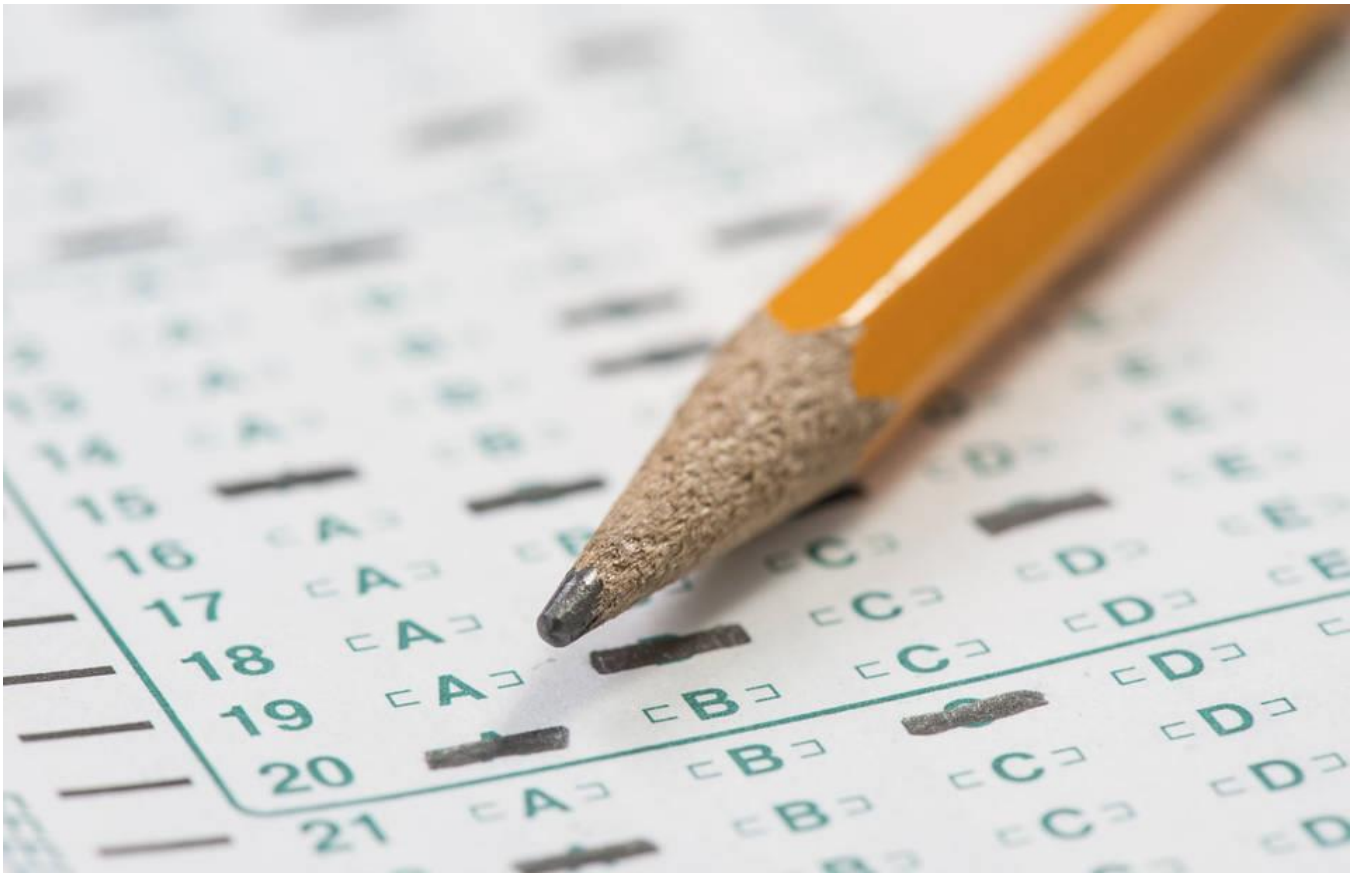
Why the SAT Isn’t a ‘Student Affluence Test’

A lot of the apparent income effect on standardized tests is owed to parental IQ—a fact that needs addressing.



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By
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Spring is here, which means it’s time for elite colleges to send out acceptance letters. Some will go to athletes, the children of influential alumni and those who round out the school’s diversity profile. But most will go to the offspring of the upper middle class. We all know why, right? Affluent parents get their kids into the best colleges by sending them to private schools or spending lots of money on test preparation courses. Either way, it perpetuates privilege from generation to generation.

The College Board provides ammunition for this accusation every year when it shows average SAT scores by family income. The results are always the same: The richer the parents, the higher the children’s SAT scores. This has led some to view the SAT as merely another weapon in the inequality wars, and to suggest that SAT should actually stand for “Student Affluence Test.”

It's a bum rap. All high-quality academic tests look as if they're affluence tests. It's inevitable. Parental IQ is correlated with children's IQ everywhere. In all advanced societies, income is correlated with IQ. Scores on academic achievement tests are always correlated with the test-takers' IQ. Those three correlations guarantee that every standardized academic-achievement test shows higher average test scores as parental income increases.

But those correlations also mean that a lot of the apparent income effect is actually owed to parental IQ. The SAT doesn't have IQ information on the parents. But the widely used National Longitudinal Survey of Youth contains thousands of cases with data on family income, the mother's IQ, and her children's performance on the math and reading tests of the Peabody Individual Achievement Test battery, which test the same skills as the math and reading tests of the SAT.

For the SAT, shifting to more than $200,000 of family income from less than $20,000 moved the average score on the combined math and reading tests to the 74th percentile from the 31st—a jump of 43 percentiles. The same income shift moved the average PIAT score to the 82nd percentile from the 30th—a jump of 52 percentiles.

Now let's look at the income effect in the PIAT when the mother's IQ is statistically held constant at the national average of 100. Going to a $200,000 family income from a $1,000 family income raises the score only to the 76th percentile from the 50th—an increase of 26 percentiles. More important, almost all of the effect occurs for people making less than $125,000. Going to $200,000 from $125,000 moves the PIAT score only to the 76th percentile from the 73rd—a trivial change. Beyond $200,000, PIAT scores go down as income increases.

In assessing the meaning of this, it is important to be realistic about the financial position of families making $125,000 who are also raising children. They were in the top quartile of income distribution in 2013, but they probably live in an unremarkable home in a middle-class neighborhood and send their children to public schools. And yet, given mothers with equal IQs, the child whose parents make $125,000 has only a trivial disadvantage, if any, when competing with children from families who are far more wealthy.

Why should almost all of the income effect be concentrated in the first hundred thousand dollars or so? The money itself may help, but another plausible explanation is that the parents making, say, $60,000 are likely to be regularly employed, with all the things that regular employment says about a family. The parents are likely to be conveying advantages other than IQ such as self-discipline, determination and resilience—"grit," as this cluster of hard-to-measure qualities is starting to be called in the technical literature.

Families with an income of, say, $15,000 are much more likely to be irregularly employed or subsisting on welfare, with negative implications for that same bundle of attributes. Somewhere near $100,000 the marginal increments in grit associated with greater income taper off, and further increases in income make little difference.

Let's throw parental education into the analysis so that we can examine the classic indictment of the SAT: the advantage a child of a well-educated and wealthy family (Sebastian, I will call him)

has over the child of a modestly educated working-class family (Jane). Sebastian's parents are part of the fabled 1%, with $400,000 in income, and his mother has a college degree. But her IQ is only average. Jane's family has an income of just $40,000 and mom has only a high-school diploma. But mom's IQ is 135, putting her in the top 1% of the IQ distribution.

Which child is likely to test higher? Sebastian is predicted to be at the 68th percentile on the PIAT. Jane is predicted to be at the 78th percentile. If you want high test scores, "choose" a smart but poor mother over a rich but dumb one—or over a rich and merely ungifted one.

There is nothing new in this analysis. The relationship between IQ and income was first documented decades ago. But people refuse to confront it because it exposes an unwelcome reality: The Sebastians of contemporary America usually have smart parents as well as affluent, well-educated ones. The more strictly that elite colleges admit students purely on the basis of academic accomplishment, the more their student bodies will be populated with the offspring of the upper-middle class and wealthy—not because their parents are rich, but because they are smart. No improvement in the SAT can do away with this underlying reality.

I haven't used the word "meritocracy" to describe this because it doesn't apply. Merit has nothing to do with possessing a high IQ. It is pure luck. And that leads to my reason for writing this.

As long as we insist on blaming inequality of academic outcomes on economic inequality, we will pursue policies that end up punishing children whose strengths do not lie in academics. We will continue to tell them that they will be second-class citizens if they don't get a college degree; to encourage them to accumulate student debt only to drop out or obtain a worthless degree. Worse, we will prevent them from capitalizing on their other gifts of character, grit and the many skills that the SAT doesn't test.

What we need is an educational system that brings children with all combinations of assets and deficits to adulthood having identified things they enjoy doing and having learned how to do them well. What we need is a society that has valued places for people with all combinations of assets and deficits. Both goals call for completely different agendas than the ones that dominate today's rhetoric about educational and economic inequality.

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