

Tests put a bias in college admissions



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The answer from the 5th U.S.

Circuit Court of Appeals to the University of Texas law school was a resounding no: You can't reject white applicants in favor of minority applicants who are "less qualified." In this context, "less qualified" means a lower score on the Law School Admissions Test.

If the appellate court's ruling is allowed to stand, African-Americans and Hispanics will be systematically excluded from pursuing careers in the legal profession and forced to accept the curious conclusion that they lack the intellectual ability to become legal professionals.

Critics of affirmative action programs are quick to point out that such efforts are merely "crutches" for minorities. But white applicants also have had their own set of "crutches" in the race for college admissions.

Many universities routinely provide preferential points for the children of alumni, or "legacies," in admissions decisions, despite studies at Harvard University that show the average admitted legacy was significantly less qualified than the average admitted nonlegacy.

Other "crutches" used extensively by nonminorities to boost their intellectual ability are test preparation programs. Although many studies have confirmed the benefits of such programs, Hispanics and African-Americans have tended to avoid test preparation programs due to their prohibitive costs and the testing industry's claims that they don't work.

Admissions tests like the LSAT and the Scholastic Assessment Test represent the American Express card in college admissions for many white applicants, who generally score about 150 points higher than Hispanics and 200 points higher than African-Americans.

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There is little evidence, however, that the short-term advantage (on standardized tests) leads to better college graduates or better lawyers. On the contrary, the recent proliferation of remedial and developmental classes at colleges is testimony to the fact that high test scores offer no guarantee of superior students.

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The UT law school case illustrates our society's fascination with standardized tests as a measure of intellectual ability and as an ill-conceived tool for the distribution of societal benefits. We reward those who demonstrate a proficiency in providing quick answers to multiple-choice problems. Few world problems, however, have been resolved through a skillful knowledge of analogies on standardized tests.

We overlook the fact that one's performance on such tests can be influenced by a broad variety of factors that have little to do with intelligence. For example, testing experts have known for years that African-Americans and Hispanics:

- Are more negatively influenced by the speed of such tests.
- Use less sophisticated guessing strategies.
- Experience more test anxiety.
- Have more difficulty with specific item formats like analogies.
- Improve their academic performance more than whites after their first year of college.

Those factors can distort an otherwise impressive applicant profile for college admissions. As a case in point, a 1982 study of U.S. law schools found that, on average, African-American and Hispanic students had made more significant gains during their three years of law school than white students. In fact, the third-year averages of minority students closely approximated those of white students.

The study's author, Donald E. Powers, concluded that "the differential improvements of minority students would seem to provide further justification to admitting minority and other disadvantaged students with lower admission credentials."

Here are three suggestions for the courts and test users to consider:

- Abandon the use of aptitude tests in admissions decisions, as various selective colleges already have done without any apparent loss in student quality.

- If race can't be considered in admissions decisions, then eliminate all other types of preferences, including legacies, athletic ability, musical talent and social background.

- Provide students broader access to test preparation programs. Although those programs don't purport to make geniuses out of morons, they do focus on problems that unnecessarily lower test scores.

The use of aptitude tests in college admissions likely has resulted in significant economic damage to the careers of many college aspirants. Hispanics and African-Americans especially have been prevented from fulfilling their dreams.

Consumers have demonstrated how corporate giants like the tobacco industry can be forced to be more responsive to significant health and environmental issues. Similarly, consumers should limit the punitive influence that the testing industry has on the life opportunities of college aspirants.

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