THE SAT, TUTORING, AND EQUITY

Iris C. Rotberg

Abstract

For decades, the SAT has been critiqued because of the inherent advantage that affluent students have in taking the test. In recent years, however, the inequities have compounded as children from affluent families take intensive private tutoring for the SAT, sometimes at a cost of many thousands of dollars. This is well beyond the SAT cram courses that their parents' generation took. It means that children from low-income families and, increasingly, children from middle-income families cannot begin to afford the tutoring that affluent parents routinely provide to their children. Intensive tutoring frequently raises SAT scores by 200 to 300 points, a gain that provides a substantial advantage in competing for college admission and for academic scholarships. That is why tutors can charge over a hundred dollars an hour for their services. Moreover, affluent parents increasingly buy tutors even for children who initially score very high to give them the few extra points that will increase their chances of admission to the most prestigious schools.

There is a lot of hand-wringing by higher education officials about the widening socioeconomic divide in higher education, with children of the rich concentrated in elite schools while children from lower-income families increasingly attend community colleges. Eliminating the SAT clearly would not solve the basic societal problems that lead to the polarization—increasing poverty rates, growing gaps in income and wealth, and the rising costs of higher education. But it would be an easy fix to eliminate at least one significant factor, the SAT. And colleges and universities would lose nothing of value. They now gain little information from the test scores because the comparisons between students have become virtually meaningless.

The paper elaborates on these points and provides data on the broader social and educational context as well as on the costs of tutoring and the distribution of test-score gains.

ON ALL THINGS BEING UNEQUAL

I would like to add another example to Paul Glastris's list of inequities that higher education institutions can do something about. For decades, the SAT has been critiqued because of the inherent advantage that affluent students have in taking the test. In recent years, however, the inequities have compounded as children from affluent families take intensive private tutoring for the SAT, sometimes at a cost of many thousands of dollars. This is well beyond the SAT cram courses that their parents' generation took. It means that children from low-income families and, increasingly, children from middle-income families cannot begin to afford the tutoring that affluent parents routinely provide to their children. Intensive tutoring frequently raises SAT scores by 200 to 300 points, a gain that provides a substantial advantage in competing for college admission and for academic scholarships. That is why tutors can charge over a hundred dollars an hour for their services. Moreover, affluent parents increasingly buy tutors even for children who initially score very high to give them the few extra points that will increase their chances of admission to the most prestigious schools.

There is a lot of hand-wringing by higher education officials about the widening socioeconomic divide in higher education, with children of the rich concentrated in elite schools while children from lower-income families increasingly attend community colleges. Eliminating the SAT clearly would not solve the basic societal problems that lead to the polarization—increasing poverty rates, growing gaps in income and wealth, and the rising costs of higher education. But it would be an easy fix to eliminate at least one significant factor, the SAT. And colleges and universities would lose nothing of value. They now gain little information from the test scores because the comparisons between students have become virtually meaningless.

Iris C. Rotberg, Ph.D.

Research Professor of Education Policy

The George Washington University

Washington, D.C.