

Connecticut Debate Association

December 10, 2022, Joel Barlow High School

THBT the college admissions process should be based on objectively measured student performance.

College Admission Is Not a Personality Contest. Or Is It?

New York Times, by Amy Harmon June 15, 2018

Documents showing that Harvard rated [Asian-American applicants lower](#) on personality traits than applicants of other races raise questions about how college admissions officers evaluate intangible criteria. What constitutes “likability” or “courage?” How do they know someone is “widely respected?”

Here’s what some education scholars and former admissions officers say about the use of personality traits in the admission process. Spoiler alert: It’s not a science.

What criteria are used to evaluate “soft” traits in college applicants?

The first thing to know is that only the most select colleges in the country perform what education experts call a “holistic admissions process” that tries to take personality traits into account, said Michael N. Bastedo, a professor at the University of Michigan School of Education.

Most schools look at grade point averages and standardized test scores and may also review letters of recommendation, college essays and extracurricular activities. Colleges that do consider personal qualities are highly variable in the traits they look at and how they are ranked. Nor are they interested in disclosing their criteria: “Once it becomes measured, it becomes gameable,” Dr. Bastedo said.

In the analysis of student records filed by a group representing Asian-American students in a lawsuit against Harvard, admissions officers discussed traits that included “positive personality,” kindness, courage and being “widely respected.” In a study of 10 unidentified schools [commissioned by the College Board](#), traits included “emotional intelligence,” “self-efficacy” and creativity. Leadership, education experts said, is perhaps the most obvious and the most common trait colleges consider in applicants.

How do colleges choose which traits they value?

Colleges don’t like to talk about this much, and officials don’t like to be pinned down. In general, they say they look for traits that reflect the college’s values or that make a student a “good fit” for the institution.

Of the 10 colleges included in the College Board study, only one has performed any study on whether the use of criteria can help predict a student’s success, said Don Hossler, a senior scholar at the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice at the University of Southern California.

Colleges take it as a sign that their criteria work so long as their retention rates are good. But even subtle differences in criteria may reveal something about a college’s values, or at least those of its admissions dean. Maria Laskaris, the admissions dean at Dartmouth College from 2007 to 2015, said she directed her staff to consider “empathy” rather than “kindness.” “It’s a broader term,” she said. “And it speaks to what you want students to learn from each other.”

How can admissions officers be objective about a trait like “empathy”?

They really can’t, experts acknowledged, a fact that the lawsuit against Harvard claims has disadvantaged Asian-American applicants. Such evaluations are an exercise in “trying to be objectively subjective,” as Dr. Hossler put it. Colleges say they try to ward against bias by ensuring that applications are considered by more than one person.

Often those that reach the final stages are debated in a group.

At Dartmouth, Ms. Laskaris said, she held a meeting each fall to try to ensure that the admissions rubric was being applied the same way by all of the admissions staff. The key, she said, was to find concrete examples of the desirable qualities — which included “open mindedness,” “curiosity” and “willingness to stretch” — in letters of recommendation, interviews or student essays.

But many of the people writing the recommendations may not know that there are particular phrases admissions officers are looking for, as opposed to simply attesting to a students’ good citizenship and hard work. That can put the students at a disadvantage, said Ms. Laskaris, now a senior counselor at Top Tier Admissions, which advises students and families applying to college.

Admissions officers say they look for a “hook” in an applicant’s file that may lift the student into consideration, but just what that is hard to define.

So are selective colleges moving away from using these subjective criteria?

No, in part because similar objections have been raised about the emphasis traditionally placed on standardized tests, which many experts believe fail to measure the potential of minority and low-income students. Earlier this week, the University of Chicago became the first elite research university in the country to drop the requirement that applicants submit ACT or SAT scores, instead announcing a program inviting students to submit a two-minute video introduction — where they can perhaps convey their likability.

Diversity in College and Why It Matters

US News and World Report, By Josh Moody March 31, 2020 (abridged)

Prospective college students should honestly evaluate all facets of their identity in the admissions process.

One reason colleges value diversity is different perspectives allow students to learn from one another

The term diversity can be as multifaceted as the individuals to whom that label is applied. [Colleges](#) often highlight the broad-ranging term as part of their mission or a selling point to applicants.

But what do colleges mean when they talk about diversity?

"It can range in terms of what (diversity) actually means," says J. Luke Wood, chief diversity officer and professor of education at [San Diego State University](#).

Diversity often means race, ethnicity or tribal affiliation, but also extends well beyond those factors to sexual identity and orientation, income level, [first-generation status](#), cultural background and gender.

But depending on what a college needs or wants in a class, that term can extend even further. Essentially, the term diversity means underrepresented populations, says Antonio R. Flores, president and CEO of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, based in San Antonio.

Colleges want diversity in both admitted classes and individual programs, he adds.

"The school of engineering might not get very many women, and for them the female applicants would be viewed as bringing a perspective to the learning of engineering that may not be very frequent," Flores says.

Why Colleges Value Diversity

Colleges emphasize a diverse class because different perspectives allow students to learn from one another, says Monica Inzer, vice president for enrollment management at [Hamilton College](#) in New York.

Diverse college campuses offer more worldviews for students to consider and engage with. College students can learn from peers with different perspectives shaped by a variety of experiences.

The interaction between students with different worldviews can help change minds or shape ideas.

"Their learning is elevated to a different level because they can appreciate and understand and hear from someone from a different background, which may change their thinking," Inzer says. "Or maybe it doesn't, but it informs how they position themselves in their own thoughts and opinions."

While colleges often tout their commitment to diversity, [minority students still face many challenges](#) both in the admissions process and when they get to campus in terms of support and inclusion, some experts say.

Wood says students should look beyond the lip service to determine what a college's commitment to diversity and inclusion truly is. Colleges must demonstrate actions taken to enhance [campus diversity](#), he says, and prospective students should weigh the success of minority populations on campus.

"What they should consider, first and foremost, are graduation rates," Wood says.

Applicants should also look at the numbers of students like themselves. Wood says this can indicate commitment to a diverse population of students and uncover other factors such as the climate and infrastructure to support the minority population on campus.

Flores says students should also look to the [faculty and staff ranks](#) to gauge a college's diversity. Is diversity reflected in these positions? The answer could signal a college's level of commitment to diversity and inclusion.

How Students Can Leverage Diversity in Admissions

...

Ethical Considerations About Diversity and Admissions

Scandals and lawsuits have dominated the college admissions headlines in recent memory.

The [Varsity Blues scandal](#) in 2019 revealed wealthy families lying about various matters of identity to get their children into highly selective colleges through a so-called "side door."

The lies sometimes extended to fabrications along racial and ethnic lines, with families appropriating minority status in the hope of gaining a boost in the admissions process and getting into highly selective colleges.

Checking boxes that don't apply is clearly unethical, Inzer says, noting that most colleges have an honor code attached to the application process.

"If, in fact, we learned that someone had falsified an application for a number of reasons including self-identification of race or ethnicity, we would rescind admission very rapidly," Inzer says.

Students should represent themselves honestly in terms of how they recognize their own identity, Wood says. Even if there is distant ancestry to a particular community, students may be dishonest if they highlight that on an application and it isn't a group they have engaged with or consider part of their identity.

And lying outright about who you are is an even bigger issue.

"If you have to feel like you have to become a lie in order to advance yourself, then that speaks to a moral failing that may speak about broader implications about your moral compass," Wood says.

A lawsuit alleging [Harvard University](#) in Massachusetts discriminated against Asian American applicants in favor of black and Hispanic applicants with lower grades and standardized test scores drew significant attention to and criticism of race-related admissions practices and affirmative action.

Though [a judge ruled in favor of Harvard's](#) apparent restriction on the number of Asian American students accepted – which typically is disproportionately higher than their percentage of the U.S. population and significantly higher than either black or Hispanic students admitted – some Asian American high school students have said they are reexamining whether to indicate their status as Asian American on college applications.

Wood, however, says applicants should stay true to their identity. "If you're in a position where you have to downplay who you are to be able to get into a college or university, that institution is probably not a good fit for you and probably won't be a welcoming environment."

How affirmative action works in practice

Economist Nov 3rd 2022 WASHINGTON, DC

In a typical year Harvard, a \$53bn endowment with a university attached, receives nearly four times as many candidates with perfect grade-point averages as it has places available. It distinguishes between these well-qualified candidates using four criteria: academic achievement, extra-curricular activities, personal qualities and athletic abilities. Admissions officers also need to keep that endowment growing, which means admitting the children of alumni and of big donors. And they strive to create a racially diverse class. The process is opaque but goes by a soothing name: holistic admissions.

Students for Fair Admissions (sffa), a non-profit organisation, which is a plaintiff in both of the affirmative action cases before the Supreme Court, argues that 51% of Harvard's class should be Asian-American if academics alone (test scores and grades) were the sole consideration. Harvard's first-year students for 2021-22 were 53% white and 24% Asian, an increase from previous years but a far cry from 51%. The organisation alleges that Harvard and the University of North Carolina (unc) are discriminating against Asian-Americans.

The court has in the past ruled that race could be considered among other admissions criteria, on the grounds that everyone on campus benefits from a diverse student body. This is what Harvard and unc say they are doing without discriminating against Asian-Americans, an argument supported by an analysis commissioned by Harvard and written by David Card, a Nobel prize-winning economist.

In addition to considering an applicant's facility with a lacrosse stick or *épée*, under holistic admissions universities may take into account what kind of high school a student has come from, looking at factors such as the number of advanced courses offered, average sat scores, class size and crime levels in the surrounding neighbourhood. Whether the prospective student has ties to the college can matter, too. It helps if a family member has attended the college, is employed there or has donated money to it. Many colleges also consider a student's ability to pay the fees.

Lots of universities have concerns beyond recruiting the best and brightest. Most, with the exception of the richest institutions, need to worry about financial solvency. This requires generous donors and a certain number of students paying full tuition. "Until someone drops another \$2bn in our endowment, we will continue to be need-sensitive," says Joanne Berger-Sweeney, president of Trinity College, a selective liberal-arts college in Connecticut.

Race may therefore not be the only factor working against Asian-Americans. Legacy students (those with a family member who attended the college) are three to five times more likely to be admitted to highly selective colleges, according to a Harvard study of 30 institutions. A primary legacy—having a parent who attended the institution as an undergraduate—boosts the chances of admission up to 15 times.

Harvard reported that 16% of its class that will graduate in 2025 has at least one parent who attended Harvard. This tends to benefit white students: 19% of white, 15% of Asian, 9% of Hispanic and 6% of black students were legacies. Peter Arcidiacono, an economist at Duke University and expert witness for sffa, found that when legacy preferences are removed, the number of white admissions falls by about 4%, while the number of black, Hispanic and Asian ones increases by 4-5%.

Other non-academic factors also come into play. Athletes are four times more likely than non-athletes to be admitted to elite private institutions. In Mr Arcidiacono's study of Harvard, removing athletic preferences decreased white admissions by 6% and increased the number of Hispanic and Asian students by 7-9%. Children of faculty and staff are also given special consideration. Mr Arcidiacono found that over 43% of white students at Harvard were

athletes, legacies, children of faculty or staff, or were the subject of special interest by deans and directors, compared with less than 16% among black, Hispanic and Asian students. Nearly 75% of these white students would have been rejected if they had been treated as white students without status. That's hardly a meritocracy. But, hey, it's holistic.

What Should Colleges Care About?

The Atlantic, By Conor Friedersdorf NOVEMBER 7, 2022 (Abridged)

This is an edition of Up for Debate, a newsletter by Conor Friedersdorf. On Wednesdays, he rounds up timely conversations and solicits reader responses to one thought-provoking question. Later, he publishes some thoughtful replies. Sign up for the newsletter here.

Readers weigh in on affirmative action and the future of university admissions.

Last week I asked, "If you were in charge of the admissions office at a top-50 college or university, how would you decide which applicants got accepted as undergraduates and which got rejected?"

Jonathan deems character traits to be the most important qualification for college—and argues (contrary to how many conceive of virtue) that the status quo is selecting for bad character. He writes:

In admitting students, these two points are absolutely crucial: First, prospective students should demonstrate their commitment to pursuing truth, goodness, and/or beauty through their university education. Those who would instead exploit the university to pursue wealth, power, or prestige should suffer serious demerits. Second, prospective students should demonstrate their desire to be formed, or to become a better person, through their education. Those who are primarily interested in becoming a leader or in changing the world should suffer serious demerits.

Today, universities are obsessed with fostering careers (wealth), training activists (power), and producing high-profile figures (prestige). They select students who desire to dominate others (leaders) and impose their ideas on others (changing the world). This is the exact inversion of the idea of a university and of liberal education. Instead of promoting virtue, universities prioritize vice. Instead of education freeing us from ourselves, we use education to impose ourselves upon others.

Until we correct course on these points, all else is in vain.

Cindy would admit exceptional communicators:

The most valuable skill I think any learner can have is the ability to express themselves with clarity and poise. In formal high-school speech and debate, the students who work with extemporaneous speaking do just that: They learn about all aspects of current events and then, during competitions, are called up one by one to choose three questions randomly from a bowl. They must choose one of these three questions and then have 30 minutes to prepare a seven-minute extemporaneous speech complete with evidence. It's an internet-free zone—no notes allowed. I wish that college applicants all had to log into a school website to provide a short video response to a provocative, extemporaneous question. How do they handle the question? How creative are their responses? How confident are they in their ability to communicate?

...

To me, this is a better measure of who a person is than being prepped for standardized testing or hiring people to guide students through the rigors of the college essay. Who are you, what do you think, and how do you think?

That's what admissions people truly need to know.

Jen would admit helpers:

I would have an exclusively merit-based system. Standardized test scores would not count; I would focus on the extent to which the person helped their community as the deciding factor.

...

I wonder how one would best measure or assess that.

...

Many of you used this question to share your thoughts on affirmative action in college admissions. Howard wrote:

The only way to truly eradicate racism is to outgrow race.

Kristina disagrees:

Because I support reparations, and these can take many forms, I would prioritize Black and Indigenous applicants ahead of others as a form of reparations for centuries of brutal oppression and structural racism. However, I'm not sure that saddling any applicant with the massive debt that college entails today does anyone a big favor. To remedy this entire problem of "affirmative action" or not, we should make all education free, including higher education. This would eliminate all these problematic questions and ridiculous competitions.

Jim expressed opposition to race-based considerations:

My biggest concern is: How do we find a way in college admissions and the rest of life to not factor in race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or any other bias when deciding what a human being can or can't do or where they can or can't go? We need to start seeing humans.

...

Luciano began by noting, “My story with affirmative action is, to put it mildly, complicated,” then explained how it shapes his views:

To begin with, I graduated from one of these top-50 universities. I came from a working-class family that was comfortable but by no means able to pay for a top-50 university. I'm also one of those people with a muddy background that doesn't fit with the older affirmative-action narrative: My dad is Italian, and immigrated first to Venezuela and then the U.S.; my mom emigrated from Ecuador to the U.S. I'm pretty white, but I'm also Hispanic. Did I game the system to get into my college of choice? Absolutely. Being Hispanic was for both me and my sister the “golden ticket” to get into our schools of choice, as well as get the scholarships and grants to make them affordable (back in the '90s when undergrad schools routinely doled out bags of cash on a regular basis). Here's the thing: I have no clue whether or not my ethnicity was a factor in my college admission. I was a top-10 student, high SAT scores, involved with numerous clubs, traveled internationally, etc. I could have gotten in, supposedly, on any one of those factors. Does it gnaw at me that my ethnicity could've been the deciding factor, even though I'm white? Perhaps.

...

As an adult, I got involved with conducting interviews for my alma mater to evaluate applicants. I thought that in this capacity, as an alumni interviewer, I could get a further “peek behind the curtain” on the admissions process. In my interviews, I asked the typical questions about grades, favorite subjects, clubs, etc., but I also got them to tell me about their backgrounds, their desires, the things they like to do or enjoy, etc. It helped me get a better picture of each applicant to build a holistic portrait of them to the board of admissions.

Did it help? I really don't know. I may have performed some sort of pseudo-affirmative action in my own way by building these portraits, inadvertently pushing for applicants with bottom-up stories like my own (sort of). I may have wanted to know more about minority applicants to give them an advantage in the process. But ultimately, we would get a report of who was accepted and who wasn't, and it often didn't make sense to me.

The bottom line is that building a college class can be a lot more complicated than most seem to think. This is probably why the college-admissions process is still cloaked in secrecy. The more selective the school, the more bewildering the algorithm becomes, if there's even an algorithm to begin with. When you have a lot of students that on paper look exactly the same, the deciding factors that determine who's in or who's out often defy logic. In short, with affirmative action gone, there's no guarantee that the admissions process will get any more open, logical, or efficient. In fact, it may get even more illogical. But that's not necessarily the fault of the policy. Rather, it's due to our system, where the top is determined through secretive formulas unbeknownst to anyone, and the removal of a deciding factor won't make it any more straightforward.

Thanks for all your emails—see you later this week.

It's GPAs Not Standardized Tests That Predict College Success

Forbes, by Nick Morrison January 29, 2020

Teacher assessments are a much better indicator of college success than standardized tests, ...

Grade point averages are a much better predictor of success at college than standardized tests, according to new research.

High school GPAs were found to be five times stronger than ACT scores at predicting graduation rates, and that the effect of GPAs was consistent across schools, unlike ACT scores.

The findings overturn the conventional wisdom that, while GPAs vary widely between high schools, standardized test results are a more objective indicator of whether a student is ready for college.

In contrast, the results suggest that teachers are better judges of their students' ability than standardized tests.

The results vindicate the growing number of colleges moving to test-optional admissions, in the wake of the college admissions cheating scandal.

Cheating in standardized tests was one of the core elements of the scandal, which implicated a number of college administrators and celebrities, including the Oscar-nominated actress Felicity Huffman. Huffman was sentenced to 14 days in prison and fined \$30,000 for admitting paying \$15,000 to have her daughter's incorrect SATs answers altered.

But while success in SATs may be effective in winning a college place, it has less relevance to how well a student does once they get there than their GPA, according to the new study.

Researchers at the University of Chicago compared the relationship between GPAs and SAT scores with college graduation rates, and found the former had a much stronger correlation than the latter. Each incremental increase in GPA is associated with an increase in the odds of graduating college, according to the study, published by the American Educational Research Association. Student with a GPA under 1.5 had a 20% chance of graduating college, up to 80% for those with a GPA of 3.75 or higher, once student background and college characteristics were taken into account. This held across all high schools in the study, which looked at the trajectories of more than 55,000 students from the Chicago public school district who went on to enrol in college. The researchers suggest that the number of factors playing a role in GPA scores help make them a robust indicator of future success. These factors include effort across a whole semester in different types of classroom, demonstrating a variety of academic skills and adapting to the expectations of different teachers. In contrast, the relationship between ACT scores and graduation rates varied widely between high schools. At many high schools, researchers found no connection between ACT scores and graduation rates. At higher levels of achievement, there was even a negative relationship between ACT scores and college graduation, according to the research, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The researchers suggest this could indicate that ACT scores were being used to make decisions about whether students were ready for more rigorous programs, although they conceded that further study was needed on this point. “GPAs measure a very wide variety of skills and behaviors that are needed for success in college, where students will encounter widely varying content and expectations,” said Elaine M. Allensworth, lead author on the study and director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. “In contrast, standardized tests measure only a small set of the skills that students need to succeed in college, and students can prepare for these tests in narrow ways that may not translate into better preparation to succeed in college.” Although previous studies have found that GPAs are a better predictor of college graduation, this is the first to look at whether standardized tests are comparable across high school as a measure of college readiness. The findings suggest that effort put into coursework is more effective than preparing for standardized tests, said Kallie Clark, co-author of the study and a doctoral student at the University of Chicago. “The more that middle and high school educators can support strong engagement in school—helping students overcome barriers to engagement in class, helping them succeed at different types of academic tasks, so that they earn strong grades—the better these educators are supporting academic skills broadly and preparing students for college,” she said.

Don't blame the tests: Getting rid of standardized testing means punishing poor students

USA Today, by Sean-Michael Pigeon March 23, 2021

Eliminating meritocratic opportunities for students to excel will cause colleges to rely on the 'soft' parts of a résumé, which will benefit the rich.

Teachers unions aren't happy, but this time, they're mad at President Joe Biden. In February, the Biden administration released guidelines to keep standardized tests in schools. Needless to say, a lot of school administrators weren't pleased. After all, school board officials across the country are trying to delegitimize test scores. But the administration did the right thing here. Standardized tests are crucial in giving poor kids in America a shot.

I grew up poor in a single-income household. I couldn't become a trained violinist or travel to Rome for summer school experiences. I could study, though. And because of good luck, hard work and high test scores, I now attend an Ivy League university with the help of significant financial aid. Testing and academic performance were the best way for someone like me to succeed.

Activists argue that standardized tests must be discontinued to dismantle "white supremacy." Consider the SAT, the test most high schoolers use for college admissions. Activists point to data showing that richer, more privileged, children perform better on the SAT. This has led to allegations of cultural bias and systemic unfairness.

But the results of the SAT say less about the test and more about high schools' failure to properly educate. Students across the country are failing to meet testing federal benchmarks, even before [COVID-19](#) disrupted education. It's our education system itself that needs improving.

Don't blame the tests

Blaming the tests doesn't help anyone and, contrary to accusations of cultural bias, it is the math section that is hardest for students. Undeterred, some educators, like the Oregon Department of Education, now just criticize math itself for favoring the privileged.

It's no secret that tests are stressful, long and hard. Even so, they were useful for me, and they're useful for a lot of other poor students. The SAT has been a metric for admission programs to measure academic potential since the 1930s. Research shows the test is a good predictor of student outcomes in college -- which is where people like me could succeed.

And testing can help identify gifted children who lack privileges. For example, when a large Florida school district implemented a universal, nonverbal screening test for [elementary school students](#) in 2005, the number of Black and Hispanic students identified as gifted actually doubled.

The attacks on standardized tests are part of a broader assault on academic sorting. Advanced learning classes in Boston have been canceled lest they create unequal outcomes. Others are going further. A number of schools in California will stop using traditional A-F [grading](#) to combat inequality. Who benefits from these policies?

Activists think they are helping marginalized communities, but they are actually stripping them of their ability to showcase their talents.

Taking away opportunities for students to excel in traditional ways at high school will not deter wealthy parents. They will still help their kids get to college.

What the poor can't afford

Rich parents can afford extracurricular activities like music lessons and unpaid internships. It was only two years ago that rich parents were busted for literally bribing admissions officers to get their kids into college. And when eight private schools in Washington, D.C., banded together to drop out of the Advanced Placement program, they cited "the diminished utility of AP courses and the desirability of developing our own advanced courses."

Children of the rich and powerful don't have to worry about college admissions officers not looking at their AP-free transcripts, but students in rural and poor areas do. Removing quantifiable academic standards won't help the poor pursue elite [higher education](#).

Two of the most important metrics that students like me have to show our academic success is the SAT and a student's GPA. Asking colleges to reject these in favor of "soft" or "holistic" parts of an application will only favor those who have money or connections.

No, a student's SAT or GPA is not the only thing that matters. Character, leadership and kindness matter far more in life. But just because a test doesn't tell us everything about a person doesn't mean it is useless. It certainly doesn't make it racist. But if schools abandon these important benchmarks, they will certainly become classist.

Sean-Michael Pigeon is a contributor to Young Voices and a senior at Yale University, where he studies political science.

Go Ahead, California, Get Rid of the SAT

DianeRavitch.net, By Paul Tough May 20, 2020

Mr. Tough is the author of "The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us."

When it comes to college admissions, standardized tests penalize ambitious low-income students.

If you're a college student (or an aspiring one) from a financially struggling family, the coronavirus pandemic has brought with it a steady downpour of bad news: closed campuses, slashed financial-aid budgets and, coming soon, big cuts in state funding for public colleges and universities. But through these dark clouds one ray of more hopeful news has shone. Standardized admissions tests, which many aspiring low-income students see as the greatest barrier to their college goals, are being eliminated this spring as entrance requirements by one institution after another.

At first, the [list of colleges](#) deciding during the pandemic to go "test-optional" (meaning that applicants can choose whether or not to submit test scores) included mostly small private institutions — Williams, Amherst, Tufts, Vassar — and the decisions were often presented merely as temporary changes or pilot projects.

But last week brought much bigger news: Janet Napolitano, the president of the University of California, [recommended](#) to the system's Board of Regents that the entire U.C. system go test-optional for the next two years, followed by two years during which the university would become not just test-optional but "test-blind." In 2023 and 2024, Ms. Napolitano proposed, Berkeley and U.C.L.A. and every other U.C. school wouldn't consider SAT or ACT scores at all in their admissions decisions.

The university administration, Ms. Napolitano explained, would spend these years trying to come up with its own better and fairer standardized admission test. If it failed, U.C. wouldn't go back to accepting the SAT and ACT; instead, it would eliminate the consideration of standardized tests in admissions for California students once and for all.

This was a sweeping proposal, especially for such an influential institution as the University of California. And what was so surprising about Ms. Napolitano's recommendations — which will be put to a vote by the Board of Regents on Thursday — was that they came less than a month after the university's faculty senate had [unanimously accepted](#) the report of a task force supporting the continued use of the tests and proposing to keep them in place for at least the next nine years.

If the Regents concur with Ms. Napolitano this week, it will be a crucial turning point in a national debate about standardized testing that has been going on for decades. Do standardized tests help smart, underprivileged college applicants? Or do they hurt them?

Proponents of standardized tests often make the case that the tests are the least unfair measure in a deeply unfair system. It's certainly true that the system is unfair from start to finish. Rich kids enjoy advantages over poor kids that begin in prenatal yoga sessions and continue through summer tennis camps, after-school robotics classes and high-priced college-essay coaching sessions. But the data show that standardized tests don't level that playing field; they skew it even further.

The best predictor of college success overall is a simple one: high school grades. This makes a certain sense. An impressive high school G.P.A. reflects a combination of innate talent and dedicated hard work, and that's exactly what you need to excel in college. And while standardized test scores have long been found to be highly correlated with students' financial status, that's much less true with high school G.P.A. In a [recent study](#), Saul Geiser, a researcher at Berkeley, found that the correlation between family income and SAT scores among University of California applicants is three times as strong as the correlation between their family income and their high school G.P.A.

You can see the same pattern when you look at applicants by race. When Mr. Geiser used high school G.P.A. to identify the top 10 percent of Californians applying for admission to the U.C. system, 23 percent of the pool was black or Latino. When he used SAT scores to identify the top 10 percent, 5 percent was black or Latino.

Here's another way to look at the numbers: The students who are most likely to benefit from any university's decision to eliminate the use of standardized tests are those who have high G.P.A.s in high school but comparatively low standardized test scores. These are, by definition, hard-working and diligent students, but they don't perform as well on standardized tests. Let's call them the strivers.

A few years ago, researchers with the College Board, the organization that administers the SAT, [analyzed](#) students in that cohort and compared them with their mirror opposites: those with relatively high test scores and relatively low high school G.P.A.s. Let's call them the slackers: self-assured test takers who for one reason or another didn't put as much effort into high school.

The College Board's researchers made two important discoveries about these groups. First, there were big demographic differences between them. The slackers with the elevated SAT scores were much more likely to be white, male and well-off. And the strivers with the elevated high school G.P.A.s were much more likely to be female, black or Latina, and working-class or poor.

The researchers' second discovery was that students in the striver cohort, despite their significant financial disadvantages, actually did a bit better in college. They had slightly higher freshman grades and slightly better retention rates than the more affluent, higher-scoring slackers.

Despite the persistent and compelling evidence that standardized tests penalize low-income students, a lot of us want to believe the opposite: that standardized tests are the tool that can help selective colleges pluck brilliant low-income students out of low-performing high schools. These Cinderella stories do sometimes happen, and when they do, they're inspiring. But these anecdotal exceptions are overwhelmed by the experience of a large majority of ambitious low-income students, for whom standardized tests have the opposite effect: They construct a wall that separates them from prestigious universities, a wall with a narrow doorway that only well-off kids seem to know how to squeeze through.

If the Board of Regents approves Ms. Napolitano's recommendations, it won't get rid of all the structural barriers standing in the way of California's striving low-income students. Not by a long shot. But it will have taken an important step toward making that wall a little lower and that doorway a little wider.

[Paul Tough](#) (@paultough) is a contributing writer for The Times Magazine and the author, most recently, of "[The Years That Matter Most](#): How College Makes or Breaks Us.
