The SAT: A Scapegoat for Education Disparity

The Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), introduced in 1926, has played a crucial role in determining the fate of countless students, either securing their admission to dream schools or contributing to their dreaded rejection. Initially developed as a standardized test to measure intellectual aptitude, the SAT aimed to identify talent beyond socioeconomic and geographic boundaries. However, over time, it has evolved into a symbol of both educational opportunity and inequity, with critics often maligning it for disproportionately benefiting wealthy students.

The SAT was the brainchild of Carl Brigham, a psychologist at Princeton University, who created the test using methods derived from World War I intelligence assessments. Its original purpose was to measure innate intellectual ability rather than knowledge of specific subjects. The hope was that the test could democratize higher education by identifying talented individuals regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Harvard University played a vital role in popularizing the SAT. Under President James Bryant Conant in the 1930s, Harvard adopted the test to identify and award scholarships to academically gifted students from diverse economic and geographic backgrounds. This use of the SAT as a meritocratic tool helped establish its role in higher education, inspiring other prestigious colleges to follow suit. By the 1940s, the SAT had become a critical element in college admissions at highly selective institutions.

The GI Bill expanded access to higher education after World War II, increasing the demand for standardized assessments to evaluate a growing and diverse pool of applicants. Colleges used the SAT to standardize admissions decisions across varied educational systems, attract talented students from across the country and internationally, and identify academic potential beyond regional curriculum differences. While the SAT facilitated these goals, critics soon began to question whether it truly leveled the playing field or merely reinforced existing social hierarchies.

Critics of the SAT began voicing concerns about its fairness as early as the 1960s. Research revealed strong correlations between SAT scores and socioeconomic factors, including family income, parental education, and access to resources. These findings suggested that the SAT was not solely measuring innate ability but also reflecting the advantages conferred by wealth. Families with ample means could afford expensive test prep services offered by companies like Kaplan and the Princeton Review, which promised considerable score improvements.

It is true that one can improve SAT scores by taking expensive prep courses, but these are not the sole secret to achieving desired scores. Ultimately, each student preparing for the SAT must develop the knowledge and test-taking skills required to succeed. In the early years of SAT preparation, Stanley Kaplan, the founder of Kaplan, famously had his top students memorize SAT questions and created practice materials that closely emulated the actual test. As a result, students exposed to these materials had a higher chance of achieving their desired scores. However, this type of "gaming the system" is no longer necessary today. There are ample released SAT tests readily available, so one does not need to pay exorbitant amounts of money to access privileged information. With dedication and effort, it is possible to achieve a high score on the SAT using readily available resources. In truth, given my experience as a Princeton

Review SAT instructor, I often said the same things that you'll find in a Princeton Review SAT Prep Book, which can be purchased for $20–$30. Better yet, you can even buy a used copy at a fraction of the price on eBay.

Some argue that students in well-funded schools often have access to advanced coursework such as AP classes and extracurricular activities that indirectly boost SAT performance. By contrast, underfunded schools may lack these resources, limiting opportunities for lower-income students. Enrichment programs and summer camps, such as the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth (CTY), provide academic preparation. If a child attends a school that offers a better education than others, it's clear that the child will be better prepared for the SAT compared to those who are not as fortunate. Nevertheless, does attending a well-funded school guarantee higher SAT scores? I highly doubt it. Just as there are exceptional students in underfunded schools, there are also students in some of the most sought-after high schools who perform poorly on the SAT.

There are many summer enrichment programs run by elite colleges, and students who attend these programs often achieve top SAT scores. However, it's important to realize that, in order to gain admission to these programs, 7th graders and older students are typically required to submit SAT scores above the national average. In turn, students must already be highly motivated and capable to qualify for these programs. Therefore, it's not that they improve their SAT scores by attending these programs. Rather, it's the other way around: these prestigious programs attract students who are likely to score very high on the SAT regardless of whether they attend a summer enrichment program.

The focus on the SAT as a symbol of inequity is not without merit, but it can also be interpreted as an oversimplification. Wealthier students tend to excel across multiple metrics, including grades, extracurricular achievements, and access to advanced coursework. These advantages often reflect deeper systemic issues, such as disparities in school funding and generational wealth. Critics may disproportionately target the SAT because it is a visible and standardized measure. However, other aspects of the college admissions process—such as legacy preferences, grade inflation, and unequal access to extracurricular opportunities—also favor wealthier students.

As a test prep instructor since 1995, I have worked with a wide variety of students. When I first started running a test prep center on Madison Avenue in New York City, I was struggling to make ends meet. Then I got the opportunity to tutor a student in Long Island a couple of times a week. That gig saved my business, as it covered three-quarters of the rent. The arrangement lasted for more than a year. Unfortunately, the student's test scores didn't improve much, and I felt immensely guilty about it. Yet, the parents were satisfied, appreciating the fact that I at least managed to have her sit at a desk for two hours twice a week while I was there. Given her family's immense wealth, I am sure she is doing fine in life.

Indeed, a student from a privileged background is more likely to achieve higher SAT scores due to the availability of resources. However, in my opinion, it is overly simplistic to blame the SAT for depriving less privileged students of educational opportunities simply because wealthier students tend to score higher. I would argue that the demographics of elite colleges would not change significantly even if SAT scores were no longer considered—a topic I will address further in the future.