

Commentary: Evolution of Equity Perspectives on Higher Education Admissions Testing: A Call for Increased Critical Consciousness

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Introduction

We support Koljatic, Silva and Sireci's (2021) call for socially responsible assessment, however we disagree that their suggested steps in this direction are sufficient to alleviate the equity concerns associated with higher education admissions testing. Instead, we embrace the perspective that the consequences of test use must bear directly on decisions about the fairness, equity, and appropriateness of a testing program. The well-documented, disparate adverse impact on Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and other marginalized students as a result of the use of college entrance exams in admissions decisions is sufficient evidence for *suspending* this practice. We take this opportunity to further elaborate on this argument and call for an increased collective critical consciousness for all of us working in the field of educational measurement, a field that has great influence on the structure and functioning of our educational institutions.

In our experiences in the field of educational measurement, we know our colleagues to be a highly ethical group that is deeply committed to equity, fairness, and test score validation. As a testament to this interest, the 2021 NCME Annual Meeting hosted no fewer than a dozen sessions dedicated to equity and fairness-related topics. Despite this clear commitment to equity, relatively few scholars and practitioners have taken an explicit social justice orientation or applied a critical race theory lens to our work in testing and assessment. Notable exceptions include the contributions of Arbuthnot (2020), Dixon-Román (2020), and Randall (2021) to this journal within the past year. In this commentary, we attempt to apply a critical lens to the history and evolution of higher education admissions testing. We examine the different equity perspectives on college entrance examinations and put them along a continuum of critical consciousness. Here, we are defining critical consciousness as the degree to which the perspective accounts for the systemic oppression of marginalized people in our country and takes action against those oppressive elements (Freire, 2021).

Equity-Perspectives Along a Continuum of Critical Consciousness

We begin by tracing the evolution of perspectives on the role of higher education admissions tests in serving a social justice purpose, summarized in Figure 1.

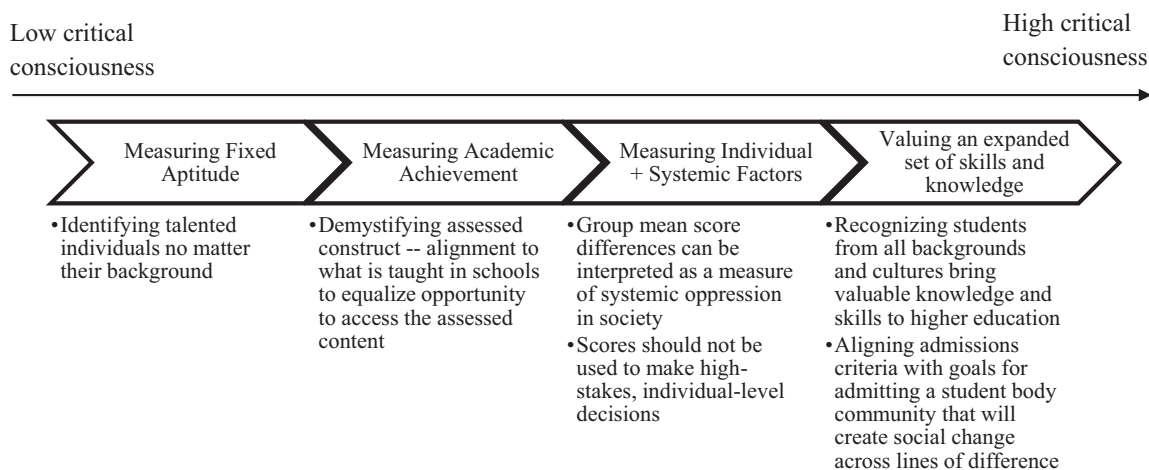
[Correction added on Aug 5, 2021 after first Online publication: Details for co-authors were added]

We highlight that we started with the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) as a measure of aptitude and used as a method to support the selection of cognitively talented individuals for higher education, regardless of an individual's social or educational background. We then see a shift from measuring aptitude to measuring achievement, focusing on a construct that is thought to be more directly within the students' control. This reflects an attempt to "level the playing field" for all students given that what is measured is now claiming to be more directly aligned with the content standards adopted by states. Finally, we arrive to the current moment where perspectives on equity are changing, reflecting a deeper, more critically conscious understanding of how racism and other forms of systemic oppression are reflected in the assessment scores. Our commentary concludes with promising alternatives to college entrance exams in the absence of achievement measures that do not reflect and perpetuate the inequities within our society.

Where We Started: Measuring Fixed Intelligence

In its earliest days, the SAT was marketed "as a test of a student's capacity to learn" (Slack & Porter, 1980). Its developers, the College Board and Educational Testing Service, made insistent claims that performance on their test could not be improved through practice and signaled to students it was futile to try to prepare. The vendors produced studies to provide support for this argument, likely because it was paramount to their perspective on how the SAT promotes equity in admissions (e.g., College Entrance Examination Board, 1965). Fundamental to this perspective is the belief that human capacity in verbal and quantitative aptitude, as measured by the SAT, is essentially fixed. Therefore, the test was designed to identify those individuals whose talents set them up for likely success in college, no matter their educational or social background. While this perspective may have once been lauded as an attempt to increase the social and cultural diversity of successful college applicants, we now recognize that this view of intelligence and the companion use of aptitude tests does not lead to equitable outcomes for marginalized groups. The use of intelligence tests and their strong correlates in the higher education admissions process leads to differential outcomes for minoritized groups because they do not account for the systemic factors of racism and oppression that are manifesting within the group differences. In the case of aptitude

FIGURE 1
A progression of equity-related perspectives on admissions testing



tests, these systemic factors are far ranging and include influences on the test-taking experience itself (e.g., stereotype threat, tests that privilege the dominant culture) and more deeply-rooted environmental and social problems related to the oppression of marginalized groups within society (e.g., differential access to physical and psychological safety).

Where We Have Been: Measuring Individual Achievement

With the introduction of the ACT in 1959 and more recent content- and construct-based changes to the SAT, perspectives on the role of higher education admissions tests in advancing racial equity evolved. Rather than attempting to be agnostic to the kinds of opportunities students have had to learn specific content, instead, the ACT and SAT now explicitly claim alignment to particular knowledge and skills associated with nationwide definitions of college and career readiness (Clough & Montgomery, 2015; College Board, 2012). In demystifying the assessed skills and content, the test providers are attempting to “level the playing field” for the types of opportunities students have to learn and practice the assessed material. This is most clearly seen in the College Board’s decision to partner with Khan Academy to provide free test preparation to all interested test takers (College Board, 2018). This equity-related leaning, however, continues to represent a low level of critical consciousness relative to the role of admissions tests in perpetuating inequities.¹ This perspective cannot fully account for the systemic factors that bear on test performance (e.g., differences in language and culture, disparities in access to high-quality teaching) and instead reifies the false notion that the use of assessment scores in college acceptance decisions is meritocratic system. Using college entrance exams with persistent group differences by race, culture, and socioeconomic status to make high-stakes, individual-level decisions is problematic as the tests lend a perceived scientific legitimacy for disproportionately denying access to higher education for minoritized applicants. As Gipps (1999) states succinctly “examinations have a legitimating role in that they allow the ruling classes to legitimate the power and prestige they already have” (p. 361).

¹Not to mention the negative pedagogical impacts that the test-prep culture has in schools, particularly those serving predominantly Black students (Davis & Martin, 2008).

Where We Are: Measuring Individual and Systemic Factors

Koljatic et al. (2021) point out that institutions of higher education are starting to eschew test-based admissions. The latest high-profile example of this is the May 2021 decision to drop the SAT and ACT admission requirements for the entire University of California system. Whether we are measuring something more generalizable like aptitude or something more operational like achievement, colleges and universities are increasingly understanding the influence of systemic oppression on test performance and score interpretations. While there will always be individual variability in both aptitude and achievement, we agree with Sireci’s (2021) proposed axiom that there are no group differences in the capacity to learn. Zuberi (2000) compels us to see group mean score differences as a manifestation of the degree to which groups are marginalized and oppressed within a society that privileges the dominant culture and where access to resources is so tightly linked to race and ethnicity. Using these tests as a basis for denying admission to institutions of higher education therefore only serves to reproduce rather than mitigate persistent inequities. Due to the systematic group differences in performance on college entrance tests, we agree with the decisions of those colleges and universities that are now removing or notably limiting these tests as the gatekeepers to admission.

Where We Can Go From Here: A Broader Set of Indicators

As previously stated, given the persistent group mean differences in test scores on college entrance exams, we cannot endorse their continued use as a dominant variate in the admissions process. While we work to address the systemic factors that lead to those differences, what alternative models for higher education admissions exist? Equity-minded programs and institutions have been exploring alternatives to test-based admissions for decades. A program that has a long history of success in identifying minoritized students for highly-selective institutions is Posse. The Posse program engages students in an assessment process that involves a series of individual and group-based interview experiences (The Posse Foundation, 2021). This stands against and transcends the approach that assumes a standardized test experience provides equity and fairness in opportunity to demonstrate learned knowledge and skills (Gee, 2008).

We know that learning is informed and shaped by the culturally situated lived experiences of the students—the cognitive resources students are bringing to institutions of higher education are therefore as diverse and vast as their cultures, communities, and lives (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Given this diversity, we imagine an alternate set of admissions criteria that aim to admit a student body that is able to sustain a thriving academic community across areas of difference and contribute to the transformation of the institution as one that serves all students well, no matter their social, racial, or cultural background. With these goals in mind, standards for selection may include knowledge, skills, and dispositions such as: passion and commitment, adaptability, short-term, and long-term goals, ability to build connections and a sense of belonging, cultural competence, ability to navigate adversity, and propensity for leadership and collective responsibility (Sedlacek, 2005; Poggio, Thomas, & Ginsberg, 2019). Academic achievement, as measured by standardized tests, may be useful in playing a limited, compensatory role, but always in partnership with divergent measures that value and represent multiple ways of knowing, doing, and being.

Conclusion

Despite the lack of consensus on the best alternatives to end our reliance on test-based admissions, we applaud those colleges and universities who have acknowledged the systemic unfairness in interpreting individual student scores as attributable to individual student factors alone. Ceasing to use college entrance exams as a primary factor in admissions decisions is an explicit attempt to interrupt longstanding patterns of oppression and is a justified and necessary step in the direction toward a focus on the more socially responsible assessment practice called for by Koljatic et al. (2021). Research and evaluation of higher education admissions with an explicit social justice orientation must be encouraged, supported and continued.

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