



What if African-Centric Tests were required to be admitted into College—How Would You Do?

by Dr. Charles Taylor

The purpose of this article is to show that standardized tests are culturally biased and shouldn't be the sole criterion used to determine admission to college.

Most Americans do Poorly on Tests

No group on earth is more tested than American children. According to David Nyberg in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the majority test out as lacking in ability, aptitude or intelligence (Nyberg, 1986). Does that tell us something about the majority of Americans or something about the majority of tests? It's been argued that tests generally test your knowledge of the test, rather than your intelligence.

Sternberg and Grigorenko (2004) define the theory of successful intelligence as 'one's ability to achieve success in life in terms of one's personal standards, within one's socio-cultural context'. For someone, giving up a lucrative career in medicine at a highly prestigious medical center in the United States to work with AIDS patients somewhere in rural India might not be considered a very intelligent decision, but for another, it might be what she wanted to do her entire life. Furthermore, academic tests only test one aspect of a person's intelligence, whereas intelligence should be considered as a more holistic concept.

Merely evaluating children on academic standards leaves out any practical knowledge that they might have, which based on the context they live in might be more useful for them than say knowing how to solve a complex algebraic problem, (Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2004). Knowing how to fish and having good fishing skills, for a person living in rural Alaska, should count towards their intelligence, even when they do not know how to solve quadratic equations.

Do Test Scores Reflect the Lack of Ability or Lack of Opportunity?

The problem with standardized tests is not only in the test construction, but how the tests are used. Take the IQ test for example. As the judge found in *Hobson vs. Hansen* (1967) (the case that was supposed to abolish the tracking system in Washington D.C. schools) when standard ability tests are given to low income black children, they are less precise and less accurate, so it's virtually impossible to tell whether the test score reflects the lack of ability or lack of opportunity. Tracking was used as a means to perpetuate racial and economic segregation as poor black students were placed in the 'slow tracks', due to their inability to perform as well on tests as their white counterparts, (Heynes, 1974).



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It is also interesting to note that the decision to track students came on the heels of the *Brown v. Board of education* decision that declared racial segregation in schools as unconstitutional. *Hobson vs. Hansen* identified the deficiencies of aptitude tests and suggested that they were the main cause of racial and economic discrimination in public schools (Richardson, 2000).

Chen and Stevenson (1995) in a comparison of Caucasian-American, Asian American and East Asian high school students' math scores, found that one of the factors associated with a higher score among East Asian and Asian American students, was the attitude of parents and peers who place special emphasis on hard work and diligence as opposed to innate ability. The East Asian students were more likely than others to inculcate the belief that success was a product of hard work than some inherent intelligence. The authors also noticed that the East Asian students were the highest achievers, with the Asian Americans falling in the middle. They attribute this to the acculturation process that the Asian Americans go through where they start exhibiting some American cultural traits such as those that place less emphasis on diligence as compared to innate ability. Our educational tracking systems, special educational programs, and all that goes with it, is a direct outgrowth of our focus on innate ability, argues Dr. Asa Hilliard. That's why we can label some kids as unteachable or unreachable, (Hilliard, 1994).

Pushing the envelope a little bit further, Eisenberg (1995) argues that the human brain is socially constructed. The author interprets this statement in two ways: a) firstly, that the ideas that are fashionable to research regarding the human brain are influenced by the politics of the times and, b) the human brain is influenced by and molded by inputs from the social environment that it finds itself in. We should exhibit great caution therefore, in treating any man made test of human capabilities as 'standardized' and devoid of bias, since it is created in a specific cultural, historical and political context. The one size fits all premise is faulty to begin with.

Does the ACT and SAT really measure Merit?

The SAT figures prominently in D'Souza's book *Illiberal Education*. He cites many examples of white and Asian students denied admission to colleges and universities even though their SAT scores were higher than the scores of blacks or Hispanics who were admitted to the same institution. This according to D'Souza (1991) is evidence that as a result of affirmative-action policies, colleges and universities tend "to depreciate the importance of merit criteria in admissions."

This assumption (that is shared by many) is that the test does in fact measure merit, with merit understood as a quality that can objectively be measured in the same way that body temperature can be objectively measured. Stanley Fish (1993) a leading critic says the SAT



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is nothing of the kind. He claims that what is being measured by standardized tests is not absolutes like native ability and merit, but accidents like birth, social position, access to libraries, and the opportunity to take SAT prep courses.

David Owen points out in his book: *None of the Above: Behind the Myth of Scholastic Aptitude* (1985) the correlation between SAT scores and college grades is lower than the correlation between weight and height. Ernest Boyer, past president of the Carnegie Foundation and influential educator asks, even if the SAT did measure success in language and mathematics, what about history? What about science? What about civics? What about literature? To say nothing about the ability to think clearly and to integrate what has been learned. Using narrow tests Dr. Boyer says we tell children they have failed even before we've discovered who they are, (Boyer, 1997).

It took a civil rights movement to open the educational doors for students of color. It would be a shame to let a standardized test close them.

Take this Test to see if you're College Material

In order for me to drive this point home suppose I gave you a Black culture test and how you scored would determine whether you got a job or were admitted into college.

Black Cultural Differences Test (True or False)

- ___1. A deuce and a quarter is a term used by Blacks to describe a poker bet.
- ___2. "What it is," is a form of greeting used by Blacks, usually meaning what's happening or what's going on.
- ___3. There is a national handshake used by many Blacks (primarily males) when greeting one another.
- ___4. When a brother is crooning, he is dancing.
- ___5. A "hog" is the kind of car the stereotype says most blacks drive.
- ___6. A pressing comb is slang for an iron.
- ___7. A process is a hair slickening and straightening technique that formally included lye and potatoes as ingredients in the mixture applied to the scalp.



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___8. A cooling board, still referred to in Black fundamentalist churches, was the ice rack used on the plantation to preserve food.

___9. The majority of Blacks living today were born in the west.

___10. Jive means phony or full of bull.

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Oh-Oh-Some of you may be Labeled a Failure

Now what do these results tell me about your intelligence or your ability? It tells me you know little about Black culture maybe. It would be a mistake for me to use your scores as if they alone could predict your success. When universities use test scores in this manner, it's the process that becomes important. When quantification becomes the goal, social justice issues are out of place. Predictive artifacts are given respectability and a validity they may not deserve. What we end up with is statistical razzle-dazzle or what Dr. Asa Hilliard (1994) calls "Meaningless, Mental Measurement."

When quantification becomes the goal the fallibility of test scores are no longer questioned. So called tougher standards that result from quantification may sound like a good idea until one analyzes what grades are being asked to predict. Robert E. Lee graduated first in his class while Ulysses S. Grant stood below the middle. If we were going to make a prediction based on class rank, we'd be completely right only on the one who graduated last in his class, General George Armstrong Custer.

There are Alternatives to Standardized Tests

Dr. William Sedlacek is one of the nation's leading experts on alternative testing and has created a Non Cognitive Quotient instrument which is an assessment technique for 'non standard' students. Sedlacek (2010) is a critic of solely relying on the SAT scores for college or university admissions. He argues that standardized tests were created at a time when there were hardly any racial or ethnic diversity on college campuses. Today's colleges are very different and there is a need to come up with a testing system that allows educators to identify a fair assessment of students' educational needs and capacity.

Sedlacek identifies eight non cognitive variables that are particularly good predictors of student success, other than just their verbal and analytical skills. These include a positive self concept; realistic self appraisal where a student can identify their own strengths and



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weaknesses in a realistic manner; ability to understand and deal with racism since institutional racism is pervasive throughout the society; preference for long range goals; availability of a strong support person; successful leadership experience; identification with a community; and nontraditional knowledge acquired in a non academic and non professional setting.

Several hundred colleges and universities have used Sedlacek's instrument to assess applicants, to allocate financial aid, for student services and numerous other purposes. Since the adoption of the NCQ, many have reported that their retention rate is higher. Sedlacek does not suggest entirely doing away with the SAT, but rather, not to consider standardized tests as the sole criteria for admission, particularly for nontraditional student populations.

Conclusion

We need the best talent we can find from every group in our society. We can no longer afford to defend barriers like standardized tests that deny college opportunities and a better life to a significant segment of our people. Let's spend as much time trying to figure out ways to prepare our kids for college as we do in designing ways to keep them out.

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Answers to Black Culture Differences Test

1. False, a deuce and a quarter describes an automobile, a Buick Electra 225.
2. True
3. False
4. False, he is singing
5. True, a hog is a Cadillac
6. False, it is a metal comb, when heated is used to straighten hair.
7. True



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8. False, it was a flat wide board, usually pine, where an enslaved person's dead body was placed for viewing during the wake.

9. False, the south

10. True.