

**I Just Want to Go to College:**

**The Relationship Between Race, Class, and Achievement on the SATs**

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The Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, is widely believed to be the best way of determining someone's capability of succeeding in college. This is an essential tool colleges use to determine who will be a good fit for their school. Even so, many scholars claim the SAT once was originally used to keep Black students at a remove from the opportunities available to White folks, so why is it still in such wide use?

Today, much of the American public looks at the SAT as a neutral, objective part of applying to college. However, the SAT was originally created as a means for sorting races, as well as demonstrating that African Americans were of lesser intellectual ability. Its primary creator, psychologist Carl Brigham, was widely known for his explicitly racist theories and his support for eugenics, the belief that human beings should encourage the survival of "positive" genetic traits and suppress or eliminate "negative" ones. (Jackson and Weidman 2005, 76). Nor is it only racial bias found in the SAT—many critics and authors believe class and the geography of where certain people live also play a large role in students' test scores. The data indicate that people of lower socioeconomic class struggle to get a high score on their SATs. For example, many low income school districts, such as Pittsburgh Public Schools, do not do an adequate job of preparing their students for the SAT, which we can see by looking at the difference between SAT scores in suburban and urban schools.

The SAT's, contrary to popular belief, are not a reliable source for determining success in postsecondary education. According to Christina Perez, colleges use the SAT to predict how a student will do during their first year of college, but the author believes the grades from high school would be a greater indicator to tell that. (Perez 2002, 2) This is due to their foundational biases. This topic has been explored by many authors and researchers to find and explain the reasoning behind the SAT's biases.

The first section of this paper discusses the history and origins of the SAT and its biases based on race and how that may affect one's score on the SAT. In the second section, it examines biases in the SAT based on class and the geography of where certain people live and how that is reflected in their SAT score. For the third

section, we look at the contrary perception of how the SAT is believed to be needed for colleges and how it is the best option for determining someone's reasoning and learning capabilities. The last section concludes by proposing some solutions that address these discrepancies in the SAT.

### **Section 1: History of biases on the SAT based on race**

Carl Brigham was the original creator of the SAT. As such, the foundational racism that'll be shown in the SAT can also be attributed to him and his work. Brigham was a dominant figure in the fields of social psychology, 'race science', and eugenics. He became involved in the developing trend of intelligence testing because he firmly believed "that only applicants from the Nordic countries fared well on the intelligence tests and recommended strict laws forbidding race mixing and radically curtailing immigration of Alpine and Mediterranean stocks," (Jackson and Weidman 2005, 76). Furthermore, Brigham wrote in 1923 that "African-Americans were on the low end of the racial, ethnic, and/or cultural spectrum. Testing, he believed, showed the superiority of "the Nordic race group" and warned of the "promiscuous intermingling" of new immigrants in the American gene pool." (Rosales & Walker 2021). After Brigham wrote a book on how the African-American race was lowering the standards of the education system, he was then put in charge of creating a new test, the SAT (Rosales & Walker 2021). His explicitly racist attitudes and theories, combined with his significant contribution to the development of the theory of eugenics, reveals troubling foundational issues with the whole concept of intelligence testing and the SAT. Since this test is used as an aid in getting into colleges it is essential that this test have no prejudices.

In addition to the SAT's origins in racist eugenics theory, there are many other factors that make it racist. Historically, many of the reasons behind this can be traced to an event called the Great Migration. During the Great Migration, southern black folks were moving from the south to the urban north (Gagnon & Mattingly 2018). This was the beginning of poverty-filled black neighborhoods in the north.

The Great Migration provides a great example of how race and class intersect, a good illustration of what is called intersectionality. Intersectionality is the theory that identities are made up of all our different characteristics and the interconnections between them. For example, a black woman who is also a lesbian would experience the world as all three identities interacting together. Each of these things individually are identities that face prejudice, but when a person fits in more categories it creates a more complex experience of prejudice. After the Great Migration, northern cities that had not had significant black populations suddenly encountered large populations of low income black people. Due to intersectionality, white people in these northern cities began to associate black people with urban poverty, a lack of education, and crime. This carried all the way into today's society. These neighborhoods that are stricken with poverty still tend to be majority minority neighborhoods. Due to school funding being tied to property taxes when the neighborhood has little money the school does as well, making it harder on the students to receive the education needed to take assessments such as the SAT.

Besides the SAT there has been a big gap between white and black people when it comes to all testing. There is a .55 - .75 standard deviation between white and black people's scores (Gagnon & Mattingly 2018). The authors believe this is due to many different things, including neighborhoods, parents, schools, and many other factors. However, perhaps the most important factors regarding test scores are school quality and geography, because these are the main contributors to minorities testing more poorly compared to their white counterparts. When it comes to schools many people go to their home school which is the school in their neighborhood. It is very important to note that because many of these minority students who live in poor neighborhoods in poverty are then forced to go to their home schools who get no funding because their neighborhood doesn't have enough money to fund the school. Since these schools aren't getting funding it is hard for them to have an adequate curriculum that is able to prepare these students to take tests and perform well. In the text the authors speak on how the gap between minorities and white students is much larger in Urban schools compared to suburban schools. "finding that rural

LEAs have White-Black and White-Hispanic achievement gaps 16% and 22% smaller, respectively, than those found in city schools.” (Gagnon & Mattingly 2018). This shows that the gap between minorities and white students has to do with more than just geographical differences and there is a deeper issue here at hand.

## **Section 2: SAT, Class, and Geography**

One of the biggest biases behind the SAT is its bias towards class, which affects students of many different backgrounds—biases that contribute to lower scores on the SAT. There is a very clear correlation between the school, neighborhood, and family environment a student is in and how well they score on the SAT. It has been shown that there is a huge gap in scores between suburban and urban schools which you can see in section 1 paragraph 3. There are many different factors that play into this. Some of these factors are income, social and cultural influences, and school curriculums. These factors play a big part in making sure if someone is prepared to take the test or not. Even though these factors intersect, they each play their own part in aiding or hindering someone's ability to do well on that SAT. We will look at these individually and discuss their impacts on the SAT and why they're so essential.

Having parents that make less than average does not necessarily mean one is going to test poorly on the SAT, but it does help to explain why someone may score lower than their counterparts who have two working parents with stable incomes. A parent's income has a strongly positive correlation on a student's ability to do well academically and perform well on tests. This is because a parent with a higher income has the money and resources to help aid their child in doing well on the test. According to Kim Elsesser of Forbes:

With regard to income, a 2015 [analysis](#) found that students with family income less than \$20,000 scored lowest on the test, and those with family income above \$200,000 scored highest. And we're not talking about just a couple of points. The average reading score for those students whose family income is below \$20,000 is 433, but the average for those with income of above \$200,000 is 570 (2019)

This shows how big of a difference family income makes. Having a parent with stable income can affect what school you get into. This is extremely important because there is a direct correlation between the quality of a school a student attends and how well they might perform. A primary cause for this is the access to better educational resources: not only can parents with higher incomes afford to put their children in better schools, but they can also afford tutors and additional classes that may help their students perform better academically. Family income not only affects access to resources, it also has implications for the cultural and social significance of the SAT and college acceptances. \correlation between high income and the importance of cultural and social pressures of the SAT and college acceptance. Having a higher income creates an image that some may feel they have to keep up, which, part of that falls onto their children. Being part of a wealthy family gives a type of practical financial and cultural knowledge that others would not get if they were from a lower-income family. This process of intergenerational advantages is driven by cultural knowledge, habits and expectations.

This practical understanding of college admissions can be seen in a variety of ways. One of the most important of those is cultural capital, which is defined as "the knowledge, skills, education, or resources that provide individuals with the ability to perform at a high level in a given post secondary context," (Aragon & Kose 2007, 105). One fundamental benefit of having cultural capital is knowing which courses and which types of curriculum best situate a student for college admissions. When a person comes from a lineage of parents who attended college, that person is likely to be much more familiar with the process of getting accepted into colleges. This preparation for college acceptance begins at an early age, and continues throughout

schooling. For instance, a parent who is familiar with the college acceptance process might put in significant effort to enroll their child in honor classes, because they are aware that taking higher-level courses is needed in order to increase their child's college readiness.. It may also look like putting one's child in special classes so they learn the things needed to prepare them for standardized tests such as the PSSA, ACT, SAT, and the Keystones. `Additionally, accessing higher level math in younger grades better prepares you to access advanced content in high school. "Students normally need to complete Algebra I in order to take higher level mathematics and science courses.[3] Taking the course earlier in their academic careers allows students sufficient time to take the more advanced courses that are often prerequisites for postsecondary STEM majors." (US Department of Education 2018) This shows that if you have not taken algebra 1 in middle school then you are not able to advance to higher math that you need to take in order to perform well on the SAT which is why this is referred to as a gatekeeper.

Alongside classes these parents may create good habits that they know are good to have to perform better in school such as nightly reading and or nightly studying. They are able to get their children to begin reading certain authors at a young age because they are aware that these are writings you will need to be able to comprehend in order to do well on tests such as the SAT. "Students who reach grade-level proficiency in reading by grade 3 are four times more likely to graduate and succeed in their careers." (Regional Educational Laboratory 2018) These parents also know what schools to put their children in to help cultivate them in a way that is the most beneficial. All of these factors are what makes a difference in a students education in regards to cultural capital.

These parents also have an image to uphold and now have an expectation of future success that their child now must uphold too, including going to college. In a family where there are generations of college graduates it is usually unacceptable for the children to not go to college as well. It is also not acceptable for them to not go to schools deemed as exceptional. This is a kind of conspicuous consumption

that also plays a part in the results a student may get on the SAT. These kids of financially stable parents have a pressure to do well in school in order to help set up their lives that kids from a lower class will not have. “Students whose parents hold high expectations receive higher grades, achieve higher scores on standardized tests, and persist longer in school than do those whose parents hold relatively low expectations” (Yamamoto & Holloway 2010) Since the SAT contributes to where you’ll be able to go for college it is important that their kids perform well on it so that they may get into the best schools possible. This also helps contribute to generational wealth which is most of these wealthy families' ultimate goal. In order to keep the success going in their family they must create a path of success that they know will work because they have already been down this path.

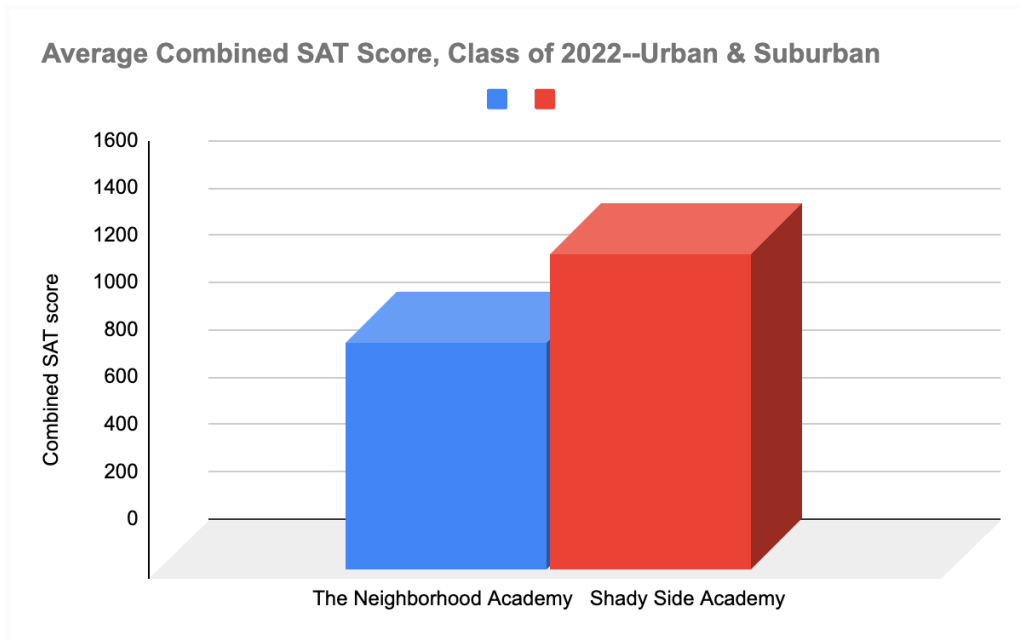
### **Case Study–Shady Side Academy**

This makes sense: when you have read literature as young as middle school and then keep studying it for years to come then of course it will be easier to understand the reading material on the SAT compared to someone who has never read Shakespeare. For example, take Shady Side Side Academy, a college preparatory school located in the Pittsburgh area whose 2022-2023 tuition was 56,675 dollars a year. They teach Shakespeare as young as 7th grade and continue teaching it all throughout high school. This correlates with Shady Side Academy’s high SAT scores. As of the reported data from 2021-2022 academic year, the school’s average SAT score was 1338 on a 1600 scale, with a middle 50% of the students falling within the 1230-1470 range. (Shady Side Academy 2022) Looking at the distribution it shows that 25% score above a 1470 and 25% score below a 1230. This helps to show how class and income plays such a beneficial role in a student’s education aiding in their ability to perform well on standardized tests such as the SAT. These scores show that a school such as Shady Side Academy where people of upper middle class and higher send their kids does actually help a student perform better academically.



We can compare these scores to The Neighborhood Academy which is another private school in the inner city of Pittsburgh located in Stanton Heights. This school is also to be considered a college preparatory school. Unlike Shady Side academy The Neighborhood Academy is tuition based meaning that each family pays based on what they can afford. The starting cost is \$50 for families that make 25,000 and below with a \$10 increase for every thousand you make above 25,000. (The Neighborhood Academy 2022) Also like Shady Side The Neighborhood Academy also has a middle school that is all boys 6-12. However our curriculum is very different from theirs, while they introduce literature at a very young age The Neighborhood Academy doesn't have it in their curriculum at all. Now, not having literature in your curriculum is very crucial for many reasons, one being reading comprehension. Reading authors such as Shakespeare is a reading comprehension that you will need to perform well on standardized tests. For SAT scores The Neighborhood Academy does post their scores on the website so their scores are calculated differently. Their overall SAT average score for 2022 is a 963 on a 1600 scale with a 474 in math and a 490 in reading. In a graph below you will see a side by side comparison of their overall averaged scores with Shady Academy being almost 30% higher. This only goes to show the difference curriculum, funding, and resources make in a school.

*Graph One*



### Section 3: Counter Arguments

Even though the SAT receives a lot of negative feedback there are people who believe that there are reasons for keeping the SAT. For example some believe the SAT are good for testing intelligence, then there's some who believe this is a tool needed for college acceptances.

It is believed among both people in support of the SAT and people against, that there has to be some indicator of intelligence other than grades. This belief is what mainly gives the SAT purpose. The reason for needing an intelligence test is due to the difference in academics in other schools. During college acceptance schools must evaluate all their applicants which may be a lot harder than it seems. When looking into students gpa, one student may have a 4.0 but it may be in a school who's curriculum is a lot more lax compared to a student who has a 3.5 in a school that is more rigorous. Colleges must take all different factors into consideration when considering a student To make sure they give every student a fair chance at acceptance for that college. This is why colleges may believe the SAT is useful, because it helps schools look further into a student's intelligence without having to look so much into the person's school. Since these tests are standardized

meaning they're the same they can be compared on the same level making it easier on colleges who don't have time to look at every applicant individually.

It is true that there is something needed to help evaluate students who attended different schools and have non-comparable GPA, but should it be the SAT? It has been discussed, the many reasons the SAT is no longer an adequate test for accessing a student's intelligence or productivity. Due to the biases in the SAT it can not fairly determine someone's chance of success. These standardized tests are meant to give an evaluation of a student's intelligence which is then looked at by colleges to see how well they think you'd perform in their school. The only problem with this is it can falsely evaluate a student's intelligence and give them a score that colleges may deem as unacceptable for their college ultimately lowering their chance of getting into that college. There are however solutions that lie beyond the SAT or even perhaps in the SAT.

Another argument in support of the SAT is that this test is very useful as an intelligence test, which can be used for anyone. The SAT for many years has been used to test intelligence in highschool students and is even used as a measurement for potential achievement. Colleges could predict if a student would do well academically and whether or not they'd drop out. The SAT to most schools is the best and most accurate tool to predict someone's potential achievement in college and beyond. SAT scores combined with a highschool GPA are proven to have a 15% difference in predicting a student's intelligence than High School grades alone.(Frey 2019) Not only are the SAT used for students but it is used as an intelligence test for others as well. Like an IQ test the SAT has been used to see where a person's intelligence level is at and not in regards to school. There are cases such as accidents that may stunt a person's learning capability and the SAT are a good way of seeing where these people are academic wise.

SATs are an outdated use for indicating intelligence and college placement. Timed standardized tests are not the most effective way to test how someone is as a student. Instructors often complain of how meaningless and unreliable a timed test

is. Timed standardized tests can only become more accurate to a student's academic prowess when you take the time constraint away (HHS Public Access). On top of it being meaningless, it creates a harmful stereotype for people with intellectual disabilities. Slowness was similar to lacking intellect. Taking 5 minutes to answer 1 question correctly doesn't mean someone is less intelligent than someone who answered 5 questions correctly in 1 minute. In the end the timed limitations on the SATs are doing more harm than good for potential college students. People are getting a lower chance of college acceptance due to them not being fast enough. Speed does not indicate intelligence.

#### **Section 4: Solutions Within and Beyond**

Now that it has been shown how problematic the SAT is, denouncing it is not enough, we must find a solution. Whether that be completely getting rid of the SAT or simply reforming it. However we can not keep administering this same system that is currently failing us. It may not be realized how crucial it is to not have a test that demonstrates clear biases, but these tests ultimately affect the lives of many so it is important that they be completely fair. The test itself may not be the direct problem, but factors such as class and race ultimately affect it making the test a problem. Since we can't change the issues facing class and race currently we must administer a test that won't be affected by these factors. A test like this would test a student's knowledge and not just what they've been taught. It would no longer be a timed test because timed tests affect students' scores negatively. Another option would be completely abolishing this test until we find a replacement.

Another option would be completely demolishing this test until we find a replacement. We see how much harm this test does to a student's chances of getting into college, and there are other more intellectually inclusive methods that can showcase a student's academic abilities. HHS Public access suggests that the SATs should be replaced with projects, reflections, or any type of demonstrative type of assessment. (HHS Public access 2022) This gives students the opportunity to use

their most powerful academic assets in order to showcase both their intelligence and dedication to their education. Until we can find a more inclusive benefit for students, the SATs should be eradicated or no longer required in all college applications.

Some colleges have attempted this by allowing students to choose to be test optional during admissions but that is not an adequate solution. This is because even if a student chooses to be test optional, meaning their test scores won't be considered, their counterparts who do choose to submit their scores and have good scores will be more likely to be prioritized over them which makes this system still unfair. For this reason the abolishment of the SAT seems very essential if it continues to be unreformed.

If the answer was to reform the test that should look like no more timed standardized tests. The SAT is supposed to be a predictor of college success, for them to know how you'll do in the first year of college yet the SAT seems to be testing a person's test taking ability and not what they know. Having a time cap on a test such as the SAT is not beneficial for anyone. It is not fair to assume that a person may not do well in college because they can not read literature in a "timely fashion" considered by the college board. It is totally okay to read at a slower pace or work at a slower pace without that meaning that they cannot perform as well as their counterpart who was able to read faster. It has been proven that tests that don't have timed requirements have better outcomes than ones that do. According to HSS Public Access there are four reasons to not administer timed tests: "(1) Time-limited tests are less valid;... (2) Time-limited tests are less reliable;... (3) Time-limited tests are less inclusive;...(4) Time-limited tests are less equitable;"<sup>1</sup> (Gernsbacher,

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<sup>1</sup> The full explanation for these four reasons follows: (1) Time-limited tests are less valid; students' test-taking pace is not a valid reflection of their knowledge and mastery. (2) Time-limited tests are less reliable; estimates of time-limited tests' reliability are artificially inflated due to artifactual consistency in students' rate of work rather than authentic consistency in students' level of knowledge. (3) Time-limited tests are less inclusive; time-limited tests exclude students with documented disabilities who, because they are legally allowed additional test-taking time, are often literally excluded from test-taking classrooms. (4) Time-limited tests are less equitable; in addition to excluding students with documented disabilities, time-limited tests can also impede students who are learning English, students from underrepresented backgrounds, students who are older than average, and students with disabilities who encounter barriers (e.g., stigma and financial expense) in obtaining disability documentation and legally mandated accommodations."

Soicher, & Becker-Blease 2020) This just goes to show how beneficial it would be to get rid of the time aspect of the SAT making it more fair to all the students who take it.

There is a clear problem with the SAT that needs to be solved. It can no longer be continuously overlooked while affecting the lives of many students, stunting their chances of getting into a college they need to enhance their future. As noted here, the SAT originated from clearly racist theories, and from there has affected minorities and their chances of getting into college for decades. Whether it's from geographics, class, schools, race, or cultural capital, the SAT shows a clear bias towards the already privileged and powerful in our society. In order to create a fairer system, we must move away from the SAT and other measures that only look at aptitude, and instead find ways to better predict success in college and beyond. Only then will college admissions be able to truly reflect the society that we live in.

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