

Standardized Tests Discriminate Against Minority and Lower Income Students

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Joseph Soares, a sociology professor at Wake Forest University, has been a vocal critic of the use of [standardized tests](#) in the college admission process.

Test Scores Favor Wealthier Students

Soares' research has found that tests like the ACTs and SATs put low-income and [minority students](#) at significant disadvantages and have resulted in a lack of diversity at the nation's four-year colleges, including public universities in the UNC [University of North Carolina] system. He thinks high school grade point averages would give admissions counselors a better grasp of a student's abilities without the gender and racial biases that test scores carry. Soares shared his thoughts recently with N.C. Policy Watch, and told us why he thinks North Carolina's public university system should turn its back on the ACTs and SATs.

[NC Policy Watch]: Is the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the state's flagship university, serving [poor](#) and rich [students](#) equally?

[Joseph Soares]: No. UNC-Chapel Hill's student population has the same economic composition of an elite private college. At UNC-Chapel Hill, 72 percent of undergraduates come from families with incomes in the top quartile of North Carolinians; the national average for private colleges is 79 percent.

Also at Chapel Hill, only 12 percent of the students come from families in the bottom half of North Carolina's incomes. We are missing out on a lot of talent that would benefit our state's human capital and economic welfare and we need to get more youths from the bottom half of our families into our public universities. Why do students from higher-income families have a better chance of getting into UNC-Chapel Hill than those from poorer families? Admissions that rely on test scores more than high school [grades](#) generate a student body that is biased toward students from higher incomes and against those from lower incomes and racial [minorities](#).

Independent researchers, and even the testing agencies themselves, all agree that high school grades have always worked better than test scores in predicting college grades. It is a myth that grade inflation or quality variations between high schools reduces or eliminates the statistical superiority of high school grades over standardized tests. High school grades reflect years of effort and are a more reliable assessment of college potential than test scores.

[The SAT] is a more reliable predictor of demographics than it is of academic performance. In my book "SAT Wars: The Case for Test-Optional [College Admissions](#)," there is a chapter written by the emeritus president of the University of California, Richard Atkinson, and his statistical colleague, Saul Geiser, where they point out this fact. Geiser and Atkinson wrote, "Irrespective of the quality or type of school attended, cumulative grade point average (GPA) in academic subjects in high school has proved to be the best overall predictor of student performance in college. This finding has been confirmed in the great majority of predictive-validity" studies conducted over the years, including studies conducted by the testing agencies themselves."

Which students are disadvantaged by tests like ACTs or SATs?

Everyone who is not from a family in the top 10 percent of the income distribution. In addition, all blacks, Hispanics and women are disadvantaged by this test. The test is a more reliable predictor of demographics than it is of academic performance. High school grades are not as compromised by social demographics as test scores. For example, test scores correlate with family income, which means the higher one's family income, the higher one's test score. Meanwhile, high school GPAs have no correlation to family income. SAT and ACT scores show large and growing demographic disparities by race, gender, and family incomes.

High School Grades Are a Better Measure

Why use a statistically weak measure, test scores, when they transmit so much social bias when the most statistically reliable measure, high schools grades, do not? The unfair impact of test scores, putting most American families at a disadvantage, was the reason the National Association for College Admissions Counselors urged all colleges to consider going test optional in 2008 national report that found, "test scores appear to calcify differences based on class, race/ethnicity, and parental educational attainment."

If high school GPAs work better, then why are so many colleges still using standardized tests?

Ignorance, complacency, and competitive pressures. In this age of academic specialization, most professors and administrators do not know that high school GPAs works better. When deans are aware, that information doesn't always translate into action. I have been told by admissions deans that they are aware that test scores are not better predictors of college grades than high school GPAs, yet they claim their faculty resists change because of the

mistaken belief that the test is a measure of IQ. Faculty also do not want to "lower standards" by dropping a test that the vast majority of faculty did well on.

Test-optional institutions (schools that don't require SAT or ACT scores for admission) are not a deviant "hippy" minority. When Wake Forest University went test-optional in 2009, there were about 750 test-optional colleges. Today there are over 870, representing nearly 40 percent of all four-year degree-granting colleges in America. We are a growing movement in [higher education](#) and a tipping point will be reached in the foreseeable future when everyone will rush to join us.

What is working in other states to allow students from disadvantaged backgrounds access to higher [education](#)?

Texas' 10 percent scholarship program, where all youth in the top 10 percent of each high school are automatically eligible and receive partial scholarships to attend University of Texas at Austin. That program works well to capture social diversity.

California has adopted a similar policy and has a good "master plan" in which the top 9 percent of high school graduates are given spots in the University of California system; the next 12 percent can go in to the California State system; and everyone else is eligible for California's excellent [community colleges](#).

What advice or comments do you have for UNC system leaders who are currently working on a strategic plan with specific degree attainment goals?

There is a great need for public universities to reconnect with high schools in the state, setting standards and having a place for each high school graduate in the public higher educational system.

If we had public university admissions based on high school records, we would keep our youth focused on [learning](#) real academic materials and we'd save our taxpayers and their children money, test prep stress, and anxiety. It would be a win-win situation for public education. We would end up with better high schools and a fairer, more transparent public university admissions system.