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SAT

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The above example was taken from a study by the Educational Testing Service about minority strengths and weaknesses on the SAT. The study, *Differential Item Functioning for Minority Examinees on the SAT*, explored the most commonly missed questions for Asian-Americans, Hispanics, and blacks as compared to a base group of white students.

The study is part of the ongoing battle to understand cultural bias on the SAT.

"Educational Testing Services is putting a lot of money into trying to do item analyses to eliminate bias at that item level," said David Hubin, executive assistant to the president at the University and a member of the national SAT Commission.

"The reason they have to do it is because it's easy to build bias in inadvertently," he said. "You think you've got a gender-neutral question, but the only way you know it's gender-neutral is if it performs the

same for both men and women.

"And to make sure it's ethnically neutral it has to perform the same for different ethnic groups."

The possibility of an SAT bias has been studied many times before. Various authors have positioned themselves against the SAT, citing what they see as obvious cultural bias. The questions reflect a white, suburban perspective. The vocabulary may be common among wealthy families, whereas an inner city family may never use most of the words in the verbal SAT.

And finally, SAT prep courses are available mostly to honor students. In other words, the people who would do well anyway are the ones who get the attention.

"We studied and studied and studied before the SATs," said Erica Warren, a senior Asian Studies major and Black Student Union member. "But the only people who were prepped for the SAT were the honor students. It was taught to them in their courses. Everybody else had to pay for it."

When the SAT was conceived in 1926, it acted as a institutionalized excuse for racism, according to David Owen, author of *None of the Above*. What better way to discriminate, Owen argued, than to give an intelligence test to a society when only half of that society is well-educated?

The test was designed by a young psychologist named Carl Campbell Brigham at the request of the College Board. Brigham was a racist of the highest order, according to Owen's book. He regarded black citizens as a "sub-species" and regarded intelligence testing as a way to bar blacks from mixing freely with whites.

Fortunately, a lot has changed since then. ETS now has a "cultural sensitivity panel" to identify potentially biased questions. And they try to include questions relating to different ethnic groups, such as the dashiki question, so that students of color will not be at such a disadvantage. Many people say the SAT is one of the best ways for a student of color to escape a low-income future.

But as Owen states, the SAT has clearly not done its job. In 1983, only 66, or 0.09 percent, of all blacks in the entire country scored above 700 on the verbal SAT, compared with 7,263, or 1.1 percent of all white test-takers. More than 54,000 whites, but only 939 blacks, scored above 600. The mean score for verbal was 443 for whites, compared with 339 for blacks.

Nine years later, the mean scores haven't improved much. Blacks in 1991 scored an average of 351 on the verbal, as opposed to a 422 average for all test takers. The average for whites was not available.

What does this show? Does this mean the test is culturally biased against students of color because the questions are structured from a white perspective? Or does it mean education for students of color is below par, and the nation should concentrate on improving that before altering the SAT? Is the SAT a thermometer that measures the fever, or is it part of the fever itself?

The Educational Testing Service study hypothesized some of the major problems minority test-takers tend to have on the SAT.

Among Hispanic students, words with false cognates tend

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— David Hubin,
national SAT Commission
member

to be among the biggest problems, even with students whose first language is English. False cognates are words that have a different meaning in two languages. Thus Hispanic students, who typically have a grasp on both English and Spanish, often confuse a word in one language with another.

Homographs are words that are spelled alike but have different meanings. Essentially these words can take on two common meanings within two different cultures. Thus a homograph of a word that is familiar to white culture can be a land mine for a black student.

A third reflection of SAT bias is the theory of special interest. In essence, a minority student does better in sections that deal with minority issues and concerns. If students were to look at the reading comprehension section, for example, and a question was asked relating to a Hispanic chemist, the Hispanic student would do differentially better on the question than the white student.

Although some students may find these examples farfetched, they would do well to think about it. After all, don't people grasp something better when it relates directly to them? And on the SAT, most of the questions are oriented for a white, middle-class audience, and thus whites respond to the questions better.

Martha Pitts, associate director of admissions, said the University tries to de-emphasize bias by including other factors into the admissions process.

"We use the test as a supplement to other criteria," Pitts said. "What we really strive to do is deal with each application individually."

Pitts said that's the best way they have of avoiding bias within the test.

"For most students, the use of the SAT can be an advantage," she said. "I'm not saying it's not biased, but we can try not to make it the only criteria for letting students in."

But that still doesn't answer the question: Is the test actually biased against students of color?

It really depends on how you judge it.

"You're not going to find flashy examples of overt racism," Hubin said. "You're not going to find flashy examples of culturally biased questions that you can point to and say, 'This is drawn up with the purpose

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