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Author
Montejano, David

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LESSONS FROM ANOTHER FLAGSHIP SCHOOL

Those who place great stock on SAT scores should look at the "natural experiment" taking place at the University of Texas at Austin for the past six years.

Affirmative action ended in Texas by the federal court action in 1996. In 1997, the Texas Legislature passed the "Top Ten Percent" law, which granted automatic admission to any state university for students in the "top ten percent" of each graduation high school class in Texas. The SAT I had to be taken but was otherwise not a relevant admissions criterion.

Critics at the time stated that this law would lower academic standards at UT's flagship school, the University of Texas at Austin. Those in favor of the "Top Ten Percent" approach argued that the "ten-percenters" were very smart, highly-motivated, had good study skills and would be able to handle whatever intellectual challenges came their way. The best from each locality deserved to be at the best university in the state. What have been the results?

Class Rank Outperforms SATs.

Over the past six years, the Office of Admissions Research at UT Austin has collected grade performance data of the entire entering class. These are not samples. The findings are consistent and convincing.

In all cases, the ten-percenters outperformed the ten-percenters who had much higher SAT scores. Class rank could count as much as 200 to 300 SAT points.

The following chart, for 7,234 freshmen in 2002 is typical of the pattern. The grade performance of ten-percenters whose SAT scores were in the 1100s (3.08) matched that of non-ten-percenters whose SAT scores were in the 1300s (3.06). The grade performance of ten-percenters whose SAT scores were in the 1000s (2.89)matched that of non-ten-percenters with SAT scores in the 1200s (2.94).

After six years of similar results, one can only conclude that high school class rank is a better predictor of academic performance than SAT scores. Other measures—retention and graduation rates, for example—also underscore the importance of class rank. Class rank, because it includes so many non-testable factors (motivation, study habits, etc.), appears to be a more complex and robust measure of academic potential than standardized test scores.

Class Rank Preserves Access for All.

The second lesson to be learned from the "Top Ten Percent" approach is that it has been able to increase diversity beyond that of the last affirmative action year. There has been a modest rise in the number of "sending" schools and inner-city minority schools. And there has been an increase in the number of students from previously "low-sending" schools.

The result of such broader access has been greater geographic, economic and ethnic diversity at the flagship university. The increase in Latino admits at UT is suggestive of the trend. A graph of rural white students would show a similar increase.

--David Montejano, Associate Professor, Ethnic Studies.

Freshman Year Performance by SAT Score Range

	2002			
	Top 10%		Non-Top 10%	
	N	GPA	N	GPA
<900	98	2.46	43	2.16
900-990	223	2.69	96	2.43
1000-1090	522	2.89	374	2.66
1100-1190	728	3.08	776	2.80
1200-1290	933	3.24	1074	2.94
1300-1390	848	3.49	655	3.06
1400-1490	461	3.67	239	3.25
1500+	119	3.77	45	3.32
Total/Mean	3,932	3.24	3,302	2.90
SAT	1,226		1,222	

Over the past six years, the Office of Admissions Research at UT Austin has collected grade performance data of the entering class. The chart above, for 7,234 freshmen in 2002, is typical of the pattern. (from a UTA Office of Admissions report)