

Sonje Hawkins

Bridging The Gap: Exploring Black Students' Lowered  
Performances On Standardized Tests and the Possible Link to Lower  
Academic Performance in Graduate Institutions

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a recurring problem in graduate schools that has been present since their inception, and it has yet to be addressed in an effective manner. This problem, unsettling in its persistence, is the lack of minority<sup>1</sup> students in these schools. While most, if not all, graduate schools have diversity policies reflecting a desire to racially, religiously, socio-economically, etc. diversify their schools in order to enrich the academic experience of *all* of their students<sup>2</sup>, the numbers of ethnic minority students represented in these schools, in comparison with the number of White students, still remains incredibly low. Part of the problem is that minority students face several obstacles including lack of support from their teachers and parents, financial constraints, and geographic limitations.<sup>3</sup> However, another reason, that is more objective, is their standardized test scores. While disparities exist amongst all minority students' standardized test performance when compared with their White counterparts, the largest disparity exists between Black<sup>4</sup> students and White students, which will be the focus of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to suggest that standardized tests are the only measure of academic performance of Black students, or even that this is the popular opinion. The purpose of

---

<sup>1</sup> When using the term "minority," I am referring to historically disadvantaged minority groups such as Black/African-American students, Hispanic/Latino students, and Native American students.

<sup>2</sup> See Josh Oppenheimer, *Graduate School Seeks to Attract Minority Students*, The Daily Princetonian, <http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2008/04/30/21080/print> (Apr. 30, 2008), last visited May 12, 2011 (discussing two challenges the dean for academic affairs and diversity at the Graduate School's Office of Diversity hoped her office would tackle with respect to underrepresented minorities including "[combating] a 'strong perception that Princeton is the kind of selective institution that does not have a commitment to color' and 'help students understand that a [graduate degree] can translate into something that will make a positive impact on the community in the state and perhaps even the world'").

<sup>3</sup> By this I mean that where clusters of minority students live, there are not schools there that are geared towards post-secondary school success.

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, "Black" collectively refers to non-Hispanic students who self-identify as African-American, African (not from America), West Indian (not from America) and West Indian-American.

<sup>5</sup> See generally Wayne J. Camara & Amy Elizabeth Schmidt, *Group Differences in Standardized Testing and Social Stratification*, COLL. ENTRANCE EXAMINATION BD., N.Y. (1999); see generally Dr. Roy Freedle, *How and Why Standardized Tests Systematically Underestimate African Americans' True Verbal Ability and What to do About It: Towards the Promotion of Two New Theories with Practical Applications*, 80 ST. JOHN'S L. REV. 183 (2006).

this paper is to propose that there might be a link between lower standardized tests scores and the implications and connotations of these scores when evaluated by graduate institutions, and subsequently propose solutions and further research that should be conducted to effectively address these problems. In Part II of this paper I will discuss the debate surrounding standardized testing and what indications, if any, it has of future academic performance. In Part III, I will explore why Black students consistently perform at a significantly lower level than their White counterparts and the connotations associated with that lower performance. In Part IV, I will discuss existing solutions that address the implications of this lowered performance and critique these solutions. In Part V, I will offer my own theories as to the correlation between lowered test performance and poorer academic performance and I will also suggest further research to establish or disprove this correlation between lowered test performance and poorer academic performance in graduate institutions.

## II. THE DEBATE SURROUNDING STANDARDIZED TESTING

Standardized testing is a tool that allows the “comparison of test takers from different areas of the state, the country, and the world.”<sup>6</sup> With respect to admissions, standardized tests are used to inform decision-makers about which people to select for entrance into that particular educational institution.<sup>7</sup> Almost all graduate institutions utilize standardized tests in some capacity and tests include the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), and the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). Standardized tests are usually composed of any combination of multiple-choice questions and different types of essays, and these tests are designed to test everything from reading comprehension and verbal reasoning to mathematics skills.

---

<sup>6</sup> EDUCATIONAL TESTING SERVICE, [http://www.ets.org/understanding\\_testing/purpose](http://www.ets.org/understanding_testing/purpose) (last visited May 14, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

Proponents of standardized tests argue that these tests give guidance to teachers as to what to teach students and when to teach it allowing for better time management in the classroom.<sup>8</sup> Proponents also argue that standardized tests, because they are uniform, provide an “accurate comparison across groups.”<sup>9</sup> Supporters also argue that, although not completely accurate, standardized tests can help factor out variables and predict academic performance because grades alone are unreliable.<sup>10</sup> Since students take various courses of study, there are wide differences in high school and college quality, and grades are often inflated, standardized tests provide a more reliable method of comparing students from different institutions.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, critics of standardized tests argue that it is difficult to rid standardized tests of test bias despite improvements of these tests over the years.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, standardized tests place large amounts of stress on students, leading to negative health consequences and feelings of negativity towards school and learning in general.<sup>13</sup> Critics also argue that these tests do not “accurately assess a test-taker's full potential for achievement in scholastic, professional, or personal endeavors, and limits access to graduate school for many individuals, particularly women, students of color, and non-traditional applicants.”<sup>14</sup> Tests like the GRE have been noted as having little predictive ability of academic performance in graduate programs<sup>15</sup> and standardized tests generally are critiqued as not accurately predicting success *after* graduation.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> PROS AND CONS OF STANDARDIZED TESTING, [www.brighthub.com/education/k-12/articles/16137.aspx](http://www.brighthub.com/education/k-12/articles/16137.aspx) (last visited May 12, 2011) [hereinafter PROS AND CONS].

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Jack Greenberg, *Affirmative Action in Higher Education: Confronting the Condition and Theory*, 43 B. C. L. Rev. 521, 533 (2002).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> PROS AND CONS, *supra* note 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> EXAMINING THE GRE: MYTHS, MISUSES, AND ALTERNATIVES, <http://fairtest.org/examining-gre-myths-misuses-and-alternatives> (last visited May 16, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Greenberg, *supra* note 10, at 533-34.

As an example, the LSAT has also been critiqued as inaccurate in its purported assessment of academic potential. The LSAT “purports to predict how successful the applicant will be in his first year of law school.”<sup>17</sup> But since it consists only of multiple choice questions, the LSAT does not allow students who have a more original understanding of the problem to demonstrate this understanding because they are limited by the answers provided, none of which are the “best answer.”<sup>18</sup> With respect to the GRE, a study in the *Journal of Negro Education* found that Black graduate students at the University of Florida with low GRE scores as compared to their White counterparts, had higher GPAs during their graduate studies, “leading researchers to conclude that the GRE is insensitive to how Black students’ skills and resources translate into performance.”

I recognize that standardized tests, while purporting to measure academic performance, cannot be entirely accurate. However, whether the proponents or the critics are correct about these standardized tests that supposedly predict future academic performance, the fact remains that they are still one of the main factors in admitting students and no steps have been taken to do away with, let alone change, any of these tests.

### III. THEORIES ON THE LOWERED PERFORMANCE OF BLACK STUDENTS ON STANDARDIZED TESTS

As aforementioned, it is suggested by critics of standardized tests that these tests contain an inherent bias causing minority students to receive lower scores than White students. In one study, it was found that score gaps in standardized admissions tests were observed among members of different racial and ethnic groups and different socioeconomic groups, with the

---

<sup>17</sup> Gabriël A. Moens, *Preferential Admission Programs in Professional Schools: Defunis, Bakke, and Grutter*, 48 LOY. L. REV. 411, 418 (2002).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

largest gap between White and Black students.<sup>19</sup> As an example, on the 1998 LSAT exam, Black students received an average of 142.7, whereas White students received an average of 153.5 out of 160.<sup>20</sup> In addition, on the each of the three sections of the MCAT, Black students' scores ranged from 6.0-6.1, whereas White students' scores ranged from 8.3-8.7 out of 15.<sup>21</sup> Finally, on the GMAT, Black students received a mean score of 416, whereas White students received a mean score of 531 out of 800.

Although these scores are older, they indicate that there is a quantifiable disparity between Black students' performances on these standardized tests and White students' performances. In a study conducted by the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, after evaluating SAT, ACT, LSAT, and MCAT scores, it concluded that "if standardized tests [became] the determining factor for all students in admissions decisions at America's leading universities, black enrollment would drop by at least one-half and at many schools by as much as 80%."<sup>22</sup> The study went on to say that "many excluded black applicants would not have ready access to second, third, and fourth tier schools that admit on the basis of test scores because typically their grades and scores are below those of White applicants."<sup>23</sup>

Although it is fairly clear that there is a score gap between Black students' and White students' performance on standardized tests, the cause is still uncertain amongst researchers.<sup>24</sup> Some of the reasons include environmental causes like poverty, segregation, and unequal funding of Black and White schools.<sup>25</sup> It is argued that these explanations have become less persuasive as there has been a rise in Black income and net worth as well as an end to legally

---

<sup>19</sup> Camara & Schmidt, *supra* note 5, at 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, *supra* note 10, at 527.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 527-28.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 530.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

required segregation.<sup>26</sup> But, a more recent theory is that “because Blacks ha[d] such limited opportunities in America, they developed an ‘oppositional’ culture that equated academic success with ‘acting White.’”<sup>27</sup> Following from this is the idea that minority children that grow up in caste-like systems do not have “effort optimism,” meaning that they do not believe that their hard schoolwork will actually be rewarded, and subsequently “ignore or reject the forms of learning that are offered in school.”<sup>28</sup>

Another theory as to why Black students perform lower on standardized tests is that instead of not having “effort optimism,” students become consumed with the idea that any flaw in their academic performance could cause them to be seen through a “negative racial stereotype,” and thus, the pressure to succeed causes a disruption and undermining of the students’ performance.<sup>29</sup> These competing theories indicate that the cause of Black students’ lowered standardized test performance may never be known but may generally be attributed to: quality of schooling, weak or complete absence of educational support at home, parents’ educational attainment, ‘stereotype vulnerability’ . . . , segregated living and schooling conditions, and inadequate support from guidance counselors.”

#### IV. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE IMPLICATIONS OF STANDARDIZED TESTING AND CRITIQUES OF THESE APPROACHES TO BRIDGING THE GAP

One of the implications associated with lowered test scores is lowered rates of enrollment of Black students in graduate institutions, lowered academic performance and lowered post-graduate success in attaining jobs. One proposed solution to the problem of using criteria such as standardized tests as a measure of potential academic success is to implement affirmative action plans. Proponents of affirmative action argue that this is the only way to

---

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 531.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

combat the inherent bias in standardized tests.<sup>30</sup> Supporters also point out that it is a student's grades coupled with his or her test performance that is a more accurate predictor of future performance.<sup>31</sup> Since many tests predict performance only for the first year of school, the scores are more comparable because students are usually taking the same courses,<sup>32</sup> but they fail to predict performance beyond this first year. Thus, if a school were to consider race along with grades and standardized test scores, the student would be evaluated through a lens that might also take into consideration the student's different experience as a Black student in academia.<sup>33</sup>

Critics of affirmative action often argue that affirmative action is merely a means to admit unqualified Black students into schools in place of qualified White students.<sup>34</sup> Not only is this inaccurate, it misunderstands the purpose of affirmative action. While I do not agree that the Black students admitted through affirmative action do not have the potential to do the work required of them, I do believe that the students who are admitted might not be psychologically ready for graduate school and this is evidenced by their lower standardized test scores. Essentially, standardized test scores indicate that Black students have a fundamentally different way of learning that schools do not teach, which manifests as lowered standardized test performance. This later translates into lowered academic performance in graduate institutions because of lack of understanding of the language of academia and lack of self-confidence based

---

<sup>30</sup> Greenberg, *supra* note 10, at 533 ("Without affirmative action, standardized test scores would be decisive in keeping black admissions at a low level.")

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 534.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> Other theories supporting affirmative action include: "1) it contributes to closing the gap in social conditions between blacks and whites; 2) it provides diversity, an important element of learning; and 3) it serves as reparations for the damages inflicted by slavery, segregation, societal and official discrimination..." Greenberg, *supra* note 10, at 555.

<sup>34</sup> There are theories coupled with this theory as to why affirmative action is not the optimal option including: "1) affirmative action undermines the fundamental human right of equality; sometimes stated in terms of constitutional interpretation, i.e., "the Constitution is color-blind;" (2) it fails to reward merit; (3) it stigmatizes and stereotypes its beneficiaries in their own eyes as well as those of others; (4) it creates a racially polarizing backlash; (5) its recipients are more likely to drop out of school; and (6) other groups have succeeded without affirmative action." Greenberg, *supra* note 10, at 556.

on the connotations associations with lowered standardized test performance. Thus, affirmative action admits Black students, who, while deserving of their academic spot, are coming from such a disadvantaged position that they might not be able to be as successful as their White counterparts in their chosen graduate institution.

Katherine Barnes discusses the mismatch theory and the race-based barriers theory as possible explanations as to how affirmative action might limit Black students, as opposed to helping them, with respect to their academic performance in law school and their performance post-graduation.<sup>35</sup> Under the mismatch theory, often misapplied by researchers, it is theorized that “students who are outmatched in class disengage from the learning process, and in turn, do not learn as much as those students with the same credentials who matriculate to schools at which they are not outmatched.”<sup>36</sup> Applying this theory, Barnes found that Black students have a lower chance of passing the Bar exam when they have lower LSAT scores and GPA ranks as compared with their White counterparts.<sup>37</sup> Thus, admitting students through affirmative action would place them in a situation where they would essentially be doomed to fail. Interestingly, Barnes also found that when considering the tiers of different law schools, Black students attending Top 30 schools “are the least likely of all minority students to experience a racial barrier to bar passage. As with graduation status, the race-based differences are smaller than the school type differences on average.”<sup>38</sup> This finding is corroborated by another study, which found that despite lower standardized test performance, enrollments in graduate school for Black

---

<sup>35</sup> See generally Katherine Y. Barnes, *Is Affirmative Action Responsible for the Achievement Gap Between Black and White Law Students*, 101 Nw. U. L. Rev. 1759 (2007).

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 1766.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 1779-80.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 1782.



students are at an all-time high, mainly because of affirmative action, and graduation rate at Ivy League and top tier schools is close to 100 percent.<sup>39</sup>

The race-based barriers theory, which is explicitly related to race (as opposed to the mismatch theory), posits that the presence of certain race-based barriers at law schools may be an explanation as to why race is an important predictor of performance.<sup>40</sup> Race-based barriers include: hostile learning environment, direct discrimination in outcomes, and stereotype threat.<sup>41</sup> Applying this theory, Barnes found that affirmative action does provide access to elite jobs for minority students, especially those at the most elite schools, where there is already a high probability of obtaining a high-paying job.<sup>42</sup> But as for Black students at a lower-ranked schools, it is unclear whether affirmative action actually helps them succeed in graduate school and thereafter.<sup>43</sup>

Another proposed solution comes in the form of the Fagan-Holland test of verbal intelligence, named after its creators Joseph F. Fagan & Cynthia R. Holland.<sup>44</sup> The Fagan-Holland test purports to result in a lack of evidence of “ethnic difference in intelligence” when using this procedure.<sup>45</sup> The test is designed to test law school applicant’s verbal intelligence without the limitations of the LSAT.<sup>46</sup> The way the test works is this: 1) 40 words are selected from the dictionary that are so rare that it will be unlikely that neither White nor Black students would have ever heard of these words; 2) students of both races are exposed to the word by inserting it into its appropriate context in a sentence; 3) the test takers will then be asked whether

---

<sup>39</sup> The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, The Widening Racial Scoring Gap on Standardized Tests for Admission to Graduate School, [http://www.jbhe.com/news\\_views/51\\_graduate\\_admissions\\_test.html](http://www.jbhe.com/news_views/51_graduate_admissions_test.html) (last visited May 16, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Barnes, *supra* note 35, at 1770.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 1784.

<sup>43</sup> *See generally id.*

<sup>44</sup> Freedle, *supra* note 5, at 184, 226 n.1.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 185.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

the word is, for e.g., a body part or a mental state, to test their understanding of the high-level meaning of the word; 4) the students are then assigned an irrelevant fifteen minute task so they cannot rehearse the new word; 5) the students were given a vocabulary test where out of five choices they were asked to find the definition of the unfamiliar word.<sup>47</sup>

Dr. Roy Freedle, proponent of this test, argues that the Fagan-Holland test leads to “a total erasure of the mean difference between [Black and White students].”<sup>48</sup> Dr. Freedle posits that a test like this would remove the inherent assumption that all the examinees had received equal opportunity to learn the concepts and materials used in the test.<sup>49</sup> Dr. Freedle concludes that “if the Fagan-Holland verbal intelligence test results are correct, and if one takes their findings as a solid demonstration of racial equality in verbal intelligence, then any other standardized test—such as the LAT or the SAT or the [GRE]—that leads to mean ethnic differences MUST therefore be judged to be culturally biased and hence is an invalid measure of minority ability.”<sup>50</sup>

A test such as the Fagan-Holland test might be a worthy alternative for tests like the LSAT, but it is hard to determine how a test like this would be implemented for more subject-specific exams such as the MCAT or the GMAT where both scientific and quantitative analysis is tested in addition to verbal intelligence. Thus, tests like this might help Black students succeed in one area, but fail to aid them in other areas such as the subject material themselves or working in high-pressure timed test conditions.

---

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 187.

<sup>50</sup> The results of the Fagan-Holland test were that “[w]hen one rigorously controls the amount of experience in learning the relevant concepts underlying a test so that all racial groups get equal exposure to these concepts, there will be no significant ethnic differences. *Id.*

## V. CONCLUSION

The research supports the idea that Black students consistently perform lower on standardized tests than their White counterparts. The research also suggests that there are non-quantifiable reasons for this lowered performance, and there might be a correlation between standardized tests and academic performance. While tests like the Fagan-Holland test are hopeful in assessing at least verbal intelligence without any discrimination against Black students, there still remain more areas of inquiry as to whether the use of current standardized tests is the *cause* of lowered academic performance and subsequently post-graduation success.

Reasons such as stereotype threat and race-based barriers may help to explain why Black students tend to do poorly on standardized tests and subsequently perform worse in graduate schools and after graduation. But it is my suggestion that there needs to be further research with respect to two areas: 1) how learning can be tailored to Black students such that they are in a mindset to understand how to perform better on standardized tests and subsequently in graduate schools and beyond and 2) what can be done in order to ensure that students in the middle tier of graduate schools, not just at elite schools, are given more opportunities to succeed, as not all students can be admitted into these schools.

As to the first question, it is fairly clear from the aforementioned research that Black students receive pressure from their external world in the form of possible negative racial stereotypes or lack “effort optimism” because of the perception of “being white” if they succeed academically, and they in turn dissociate academic success with a tangible reward. Then, Black students become withdrawn from school or put too much pressure on themselves, thus undermining their test performance. Without creators of standardized tests and educators at all levels becoming aware of these perceptions through which either Black students are viewed or

view themselves, poor performance on standardized tests as a result of these factors may, in fact, translate into poor academic performance in graduate school and beyond. As to the latter question, although research suggests that Black students from elite schools have a higher bar passage rate and a greater opportunity to graduate with a high-paying job, there still remains the group of Black graduate students that are not attending the Top 30 schools where there is already greater opportunity for success due to a larger and more influential network base, greater resources, and better reputations of the school.

Even if the reason why Black students perform poorly on these tests to begin with can never be identified, rather than trying to remedy the problem when they have *already* performed poorly with policies like affirmative action, the future goal of researchers should be to put all of this research together and help Black students throughout the entire course of their academic career, at *all* levels of graduate schools. This would thus increase their chances of receiving more elite jobs post-graduation as well as feeling more fulfilled and participating during their graduate level academic career.