
Taking aim at the SAT, 'mindless' college ratings

In a recent paper about diversity and opportunity in higher education, Princeton sociology professor Marta Tienda and co-author Sigal Alon of Tel Aviv University made two recommendations that border on heresy in the college admission world: To improve diversity, selective colleges should stop taking part in college rankings and de-emphasize the SAT. By relying instead on class rank, high school grades, and other performance-based measures, the authors wrote, universities could draw qualified students from diverse backgrounds without affirmative action.


Using national survey data from high school graduates in the 1980s and 1990s, Tienda and Alon found that colleges have increased their reliance on standardized test scores to screen applicants. The emphasis on test scores, which in part necessitates race-sensitive policies that give underrepresented minorities a "boost" in the admission process, grew in spite of "mounting evidence that test scores have low predictive validity for future academic success," according to the paper, published in the August edition of *American Sociological Review*. College rankings contribute to the situation, since schools with higher average SAT scores earn high marks in "student selectivity." In an interview, Tienda said that by placing too much weight on the SAT, "the ranking game has deflected attention away from the more fundamental goals of education."

To show an alternative path to diversity that does not rely on test scores, Tienda and Alon cited the case of Texas' "top 10 percent" law, which guarantees any in-state student in the top decile of his or her high school class admission to either the University of Texas at Austin or Texas A&M (Tienda studied data from the former). The law created a natural experiment for education researchers because for top-10 percent students, SAT scores are ignored. And the results are striking: With the law in place, Texas has assembled diverse classes, expanded the number of Texas high schools sending students to the university, and maintained its graduation rate.

The Texas law has its shortcomings, according to Tienda, who would prefer to see college admission decisions based on a broad portfolio of student qualifications, rather than a single measure such as class rank. But the high school grades that determine class rank, she said, indicate a level of motivation and talent that does not correlate highly with SAT scores. Tienda added that she is not opposed to considering test scores in admissions, but she favors tests that evaluate content, such as Advanced Placement exams or the SAT II.

Tienda and Alon's paper was embraced by reform advocates like Lloyd Thacker of the Education Conservancy, and the paper's recommendations — abandoning the college rankings and de-emphasizing the SAT — have been gaining traction as well.

Bates, Bowdoin, and Middlebury are among a slowly growing group of SAT-optional selective colleges, and in June, the presidents of dozens of liberal-arts colleges vowed not to participate in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. The response rate for *U.S. News'* peer-assessment survey dropped to its lowest level in history this year, according to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Asked about Princeton's policy on the peer-assessment survey, University spokeswoman Cass Cliatt '96 replied: "The surveys are sent to individuals who decide of their own accord whether to complete the surveys."

Tienda, who has taught at Princeton for a decade and also serves on the board of Brown University, believes that Ivy League institutions could have an enormous influence on college rankings and the SAT. "If I could go speak to the Ivy presidents, I would say one thing," she said. "You have the opportunity to set the record straight. The science is clear. Take a stand on this mindless ranking game and take a stand on this test score that's being used as the basis for exclusion. Let us go back to our purpose." 



Professor Marta Tienda: 'The science is clear.'



(PHOTOS: Ricardo Barros (TOP); BEVERLY SCHAEFER)