

THIS TEST IS UNFAIR

Urban African American and Latino High School Students' Perceptions of Standardized College Admission Tests

MARYBETH WALPOLE

PATRICIA M. MCDONOUGH

University of California–Los Angeles

CONSTANCE J. BAUER

Gloucester Township Public School District

CAROLYN GIBSON

KAMAU KANYI

RITA TOLIVER

Rowan University

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of, knowledge regarding, and preparation for standardized college admissions exams of 227 urban African American and Latino high school students. Findings include the students' lack of information about the test and their reliance on their relatively uninformed and unavailable school officials for information, preparation strategies, strategies for achieving high scores, stress level due to the necessity of high test scores, and beliefs that the tests are an unfair obstacle. Students' knowledge of and strategies for preparing and taking the tests are conceptualized as cultural capital and habitus utilizing a Bourdieuan framework.

Keywords: *college access; standardized admissions tests; equity in college admissions*

National standardized college admission tests have been affecting college applicants' prospects since the early 1900s (Karabel, 1984); however, these tests and students' test scores have gained attention in the popular press in fo4r two reasons. The first is that

competition for admission to selective colleges has increased, leading to concern about the need for high test scores and test preparation courses to remain competitive (Bollinger, 2002; McDonough, 1994; MacGowen, 1999; Paul, 1995; Schwartz, 1999). The second is that attention has been focused on these tests because of controversy surrounding affirmative action in admissions and the test score gap between Whites and Asian Americans on the one hand and Latinos and African Americans on the other (Gose & Selingo, 2001). The attention from the press has helped shape public perception of the tests and has heightened anxiety about their relative importance in the college admissions process (Bollinger, 2002; MacGowen, 1999).

African American and Latino high school students struggle with the anxiety of taking the SAT along with their White and Asian American peers; however, African American and Latino students historically and currently score lower on standardized tests, including the SATs, than their peers (Hacker, 1992; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998). These lower test scores are a persistent barrier to pursuing postsecondary education for African American and Latino students, particularly those from low income, urban areas (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Duran, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998; Miller, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Vars & Bowen, 1998). As a result of this and other factors, African Americans and Latinos continue to lag considerably behind Whites and Asian Americans in college enrollment, academic achievement, and degree attainment (Carter & Wilson, 1996; Freeman, 1997, 1999; Nettles, 1991).

Although Latino and African American students' college enrollment consistently is hampered by lower-than-average test scores, researchers do not fully understand the reasons for the persistent gap in test scores (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Duran, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998; Miller, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Vars & Bowen, 1998). Research on the test score gap has made important strides but has often focused on investigat-

AUTHORS' NOTE: *Please direct correspondence to MaryBeth Walpole, Educational Leadership Department, Rowan University, 201, Mullica Hill Rd., Glassboro, NJ, 08028; e-mail: walpole@rowan.edu*

ing one aspect of the test rather than focusing on a holistic picture of how and why the gap occurs. Another line of research has begun to explore African American and Latino students' college choice process; however, that line of work has not focused on the role of standardized admission testing in the process (Constantine & Perna, 2001; Freeman, 1997, 1999; Gándara, 1995; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Perna, 2000). The current study addresses these research gaps by focusing on urban African American and Latino high school students' perceptions of, knowledge regarding, and preparation for, standardized college admissions exams and the implications for these students' college choice processes.

BACKGROUND

INCREASED COMPETITION AND SCORES

The SAT and the ACT have become the bane of many high school students' existence because the increased competition for admission to the country's top universities has magnified the importance of scoring well, resulting in heightened student and parent anxiety, growing media coverage of college admissions, and new products and product advertising (Bollinger, 2002; McDonough, 1994; MacGowen, 1999). Overall, test scores and competition for admission have increased in the past several years. For example, between the 1950s and 1990s, Harvard's median SAT scores increased 100 points, while the percentage of applicants who were admitted plunged 40% (McDonough, 1997). During the 1990s, Stanford's percentage of applicants who were admitted decreased from 20% to 13% (Hennessy, 2001), and in 1998, 40% of Stanford's freshman class scored between 750 and 800 on the verbal and math portions of the SAT (Schwartz, 1999). Although these two universities are among the most selective in the nation, press accounts of valedictorians and students with perfect SAT scores denied admission to such institutions feed the public's anxiety regarding the college admission process. Along with a heightened sense of competitiveness, test scores are being perceived as so-

called make-or-break factors in admissions decisions, despite the fact that scores really only carry substantial weight in admissions decisions at more selective colleges (Bollinger, 2002; MacGowen, 1999; Paul, 1995; Schwartz, 1999).

In response to this perception that high test scores are critical to the admissions process, students study for weeks and months leading up to the test, often availing themselves of specialized guidebooks and software, preparation courses offered in schools, or commercially, and sometimes working with private SAT coaches (McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Korn, & Yamasaki, 1997; Schwartz, 1999). A new industry of privatized admissions management services, including test preparation products, has emerged and grown rapidly in the past two decades.

As the belief has grown that test scores can be improved with practice and specialized knowledge (MacGowen, 1999; Perez, 2002), test preparation courses have become increasingly popular among high-SES high school students as one way of gaining a competitive edge in the college admissions process (McDonough, 1997). Although test preparation companies claim that their courses can result in significant score increases, research done by Educational Testing Service (ETS) disputes this claim (Powers, 1998; Powers & Rock, 1999). However, the public perception regarding the necessity of test preparation has grown (Bollinger, 2002; MacGowen, 1999), and many high schools currently offer some type of test preparation courses to students at no cost, although the specific nature and quality of the test preparation is unknown (Powers, 1998).

As the advertisement for and attention to these products and services have increased, the public perception has grown that admission to many or most colleges may depend on utilizing these products and services (Bollinger, 2002; MacGowen, 1999). Moreover, admissions and outreach officers are still informing students regularly that admission tests are a critical component of admissions decision processes and that students should receive scores high enough to be admitted to the college or university of their choice (Gándara & Lopez, 1998), furthering the perception regarding the necessity of high test scores and thus of test preparation. Test preparation services and the money they generate are testaments to stu-

dents' and parents' perceptions of how high the stakes are, how uncertain the outcomes are, and how desperate they are to find successful strategies for raising test scores to facilitate admission to the college of their choice (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998).

SCORE GAP

Although African American and Latino high school students and parents likely hear the press reports about the college admissions process and test scores, see the advertising for test preparation courses, and hear about the test score gap, these students have consistently lower scores on standardized tests, including the SATs, than their peers (Hacker, 1992; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Phillips et al., 1998). Because of these lower test scores and other factors, African American and Latino students, particularly those from urban environments, are less likely to pursue postsecondary education (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Duran, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998; Miller, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Vars & Bowen, 1998) and lag behind Whites and Asian Americans in college enrollment, academic achievement, and degree attainment (Carter & Wilson, 1996; Freeman, 1997, 1999; Nettles, 1991). Several researchers believe that reducing the gap in test scores will increase achievement and attainment while muting public debate regarding the use of tests (Gose & Selingo, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

Researchers believe several structural issues, including socioeconomic status (SES), poor quality schools, stereotype threat, and cultural bias—test questions that require specific, often upper-middle-class White, cultural knowledge—within the tests affect Latinos' and African Americans' test scores (Aronson, Lustina, Good, et al., 1999; Duran, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Phillips et al., 1998; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Moreover, African American and Latino families are more likely to be low-SES than are White or Asian Americans, and scholars estimate these differences explain one third to two thirds of the test

score variance (Hedges & Nowell, 1998; Kane, 1998; Phillips et al., 1998).

School and teacher characteristics also negatively affect test scores for many African American and Latino students (Ferguson, 1998a, 1998b; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Solorzano, 1992a, 1992b). African American and Latino students are more likely to attend urban schools that are resource poor, to be taught by less qualified teachers, to have teachers with lower expectations, and to be tracked away from higher achieving groups (Duran, 1994; Ferguson, 1998a, 1998b; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Oakes, 1985; Perna, 2000). The structure of college counseling and general lack of a college culture in low-SES urban schools, attended by many African Americans and Latinos, may hinder test preparation because information regarding college requirements is distributed relatively late in the college preparation process (McDonough, 1997).

Furthermore, many scholars believe that African American and Latino students have lower scores on standardized tests because of cultural bias inherent in the tests (Duran, 1994; Hacker, 1992; Jencks, 1998). These scholars define cultural bias as test questions, particularly on the SAT I, which are biased to favor White, middle- to upper-income students; and several researchers believe these tests fail to predict college performance for students of color to the extent that exams predict White students' performance (Duran, 1994; Fleming, 2000; Hacker, 1992). Conversely, some psychometricians (Freedle & Kostin, 1990; Scheuneman & Gerritz, 1990) believed test questions are constructed and worded fairly and that lower scores for particular subgroups reflect an unequal access to educational resources (Haney, 1993).

Despite much research, overall test scores for African American and Latino students remain low. In a relatively new line of research, one reason for test score differences is believed to be stereotype threat (Aronson, Justina, Good, et al., 1999; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 1998). These researchers found that simply perceiving a testing situation as one that threatened to reinforce negative stereotypes regarding test performance was enough to lower the test scores. Thus, test requirements become another obstacle for African American and Latino college aspirants because of society's negative expectations and beliefs

regarding the abilities of these groups. Although Steele and his colleagues (Aronson, Lustina, Good, et al., 1999; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 1998) uncovered a potentially important key to understanding the test score gap, their studies did not ask students directly how they perceived these tests or how they perceived their ability to perform on tests compared to members of other groups.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Policy and programmatic efforts, including affirmative action, have attempted to address the disparity in test scores among African Americans and Latinos with some success; both groups have made strong gains because of these efforts (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gándara, 1995). Affirmative action allowed admissions officers to take an applicant's race or ethnicity into account when reviewing criteria, such as SAT scores, in deciding whom to admit. However, affirmative action has been controversial and banned in several states. Although the U.S. Supreme Court recently upheld the continued use of race as one factor in admissions decisions, the methods for utilizing affirmative action were narrowed. Despite this finding, states with bans continue to prohibit special admissions considerations. Moreover, the court cases and controversy surrounding affirmative action have garnered attention in the popular press, which has, in turn, contributed to the public's focus on test scores (Bollinger, 2002; Gose & Selingo, 2001).

The focus on test scores has been particularly acute for those students seeking admission to more selective institutions, including flagship public institutions, precisely the strata of institutions that African Americans and Latinos have gained access to through affirmative action (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gándara, 1995; Karen, 1991). Despite the assistance of affirmative action, however, African Americans are less likely to be accepted at their first-choice college than other students (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997), while low-SES urban African American and Latino students are the least likely to benefit from affirmative action (Perna, 2000; Sax & Arredondo, 1999; Wilson, 1978, 1987). Clearly, in spite of affirmative action, significant barriers remain during the college choice

and admissions processes for African American and Latino students, particularly low-SES urban students.

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO COLLEGE CHOICE

Scholars have recognized that barriers remain for underrepresented students of color and have begun to investigate African American and Latino students' college choice processes to dismantle these barriers. Freeman (1997) investigated African American college choice and found students perceived many obstacles, including a lack of information, costs, and feelings of intimidation. Furthermore, students' perceptions of obstacles to attending college often hindered their participation. Although Freeman's (1997) study did not include information on students' feelings regarding standardized tests or other aspects of academic preparation, test scores and a lack of preparation are obstacles many African American and Latino students must overcome (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Perna, 2000).

Research on African American college choice also has focused on differences between students choosing a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and a Predominately White Institution (PWI) as well as differences between African American women and men. There was little difference academically between African Americans choosing HBCUs and those choosing PWIs; however, African Americans choosing PWIs came from lower-SES families and were more likely to choose a college close to home than students attending HBCUs (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). African American women were more likely to attend college, particularly a 4-year versus 2-year institution, than were African American men (Constantine & Perna, 2001). This difference was due to higher test scores, better high school rank and academic preparation, higher expectations, and more information and assistance from school officials and parents.

The importance of school officials and parental involvement also has been highlighted in research. Several researchers have found that African American and Latino students from low-SES families attending low-SES urban schools were less likely to receive important, timely information about attending college

(Gonzalez et al., 2003; Horvat, 1995; Smith, 2001). Perna (2000), however, found that African American and Latino students received more information about college and more assistance with test preparation than did White students. In addition, although Latino parents may be supportive of their children's education, some parents, especially low-SES Latino parents, may be unfamiliar with the educational system and may not be able to communicate effectively with school officials because of language and literacy barriers (Gándara, 1995; Gonzalez et al., 2003).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Recent research on African American and Latino college choice processes has provided new insights utilizing a conceptual framework based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Constantine & Perna, 2001; Gándara, 1995; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Horvat, 1995; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Perna, 2000). Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1994) used the concepts of cultural capital and habitus within a particular field, or context, to explain the ways in which societal structures and opportunities (such as college admissions policies and practices) interact with student aspirations and choices to produce particular outcomes, such as college admission. In addition to economic capital, each social class possesses social and cultural capital, which parents pass to children as attitudes, preferences, and behaviors that are invested for social profits (LaMont & Lareau, 1988). Educators differentially value high-status cultural capital, rewarding the students from dominant culture backgrounds who possess this capital, leaving those students with nondominant cultural capital at risk for lower school success. Within the context of the college choice process, cultural capital may include new or insider knowledge about how to gain admission to a particular college (Horvat, 1995; McDonough, 1997).

People from the same social class also have common perceptions of strategies for attaining the social profits they desire, identified as a person's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1994). Although cultural capital is knowledge, habitus is a tool kit of strategies. Habitus acts as a web of perceptions regarding the possible and

appropriate action to take in a particular setting and to achieve a particular goal. These perceptions are shaped by a person's cultural background and values, which are part of social class.

In translating Bourdieu's concepts into the U.S. context, scholars have worked to incorporate the duality of race and class into their understandings of social status and social class (Constantine & Perna, 2001; Davis, 1998; Gándara, 1995; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Horvat, 2000; MacLeod, 1987; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; McDonough, Nunez, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2003). Researchers examining race and class in educational decisions have found that African Americans and Latinos use unique cultural capital and elements of habitus in their decisions regarding high school curricular offerings and college choice (Gándara, 1995; Gonzalez et al., 2003; MacLeod, 1987; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; McDonough, Nunez, Ceja, et al., 2003). The unique patterns of African American habitus and cultural capital affected students' high school and college experiences (Horvat, 2000) and contributed to college enrollment differences between PWIs and HBCUs (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997), as well as between African American men and women (Constantine & Perna, 2001). Latino students' unique cultural capital included family stories of previous success, and an orientation toward the community (Gándara, 1995; McDonough, Nunez, Ceja, et al., 2003).

In this analysis, we use Bourdieu's major concepts of cultural capital and habitus to explore African American and Latino high school students' cultural capital with respect to standardized tests and test preparation strategies. Prior research has found that behaviors of high- and low-SES college-bound students differ in dealing with the college choice process (McDonough, 1997). Knowledge regarding the college choice process is a type of cultural capital, and African American and Latino students often possess different knowledge regarding college admissions than their White and Asian American peers (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Horvat, 1995, 2000; McDonough, 1997).

A lack of knowledge, or cultural capital, regarding highly competitive admissions processes puts urban African American and Latino high school students at a disadvantage in the college choice process relative to their peers. In addition, the habitus of urban

African American and Latino students may lead them to utilize strategies that may not be successful in gaining access to the colleges or universities they desire. The current study focused on the role of cultural capital and habitus in Latino and African American students' understanding of standardized college admission tests and their test-taking strategies. Despite scholarly attention and concern over the barrier test scores present for African American and Latino college aspirants, particularly from urban areas, few researchers have asked students about these tests. The current investigation offers the voices of 227 urban African American and Latino college-bound high school juniors and seniors speaking about standardized college admission tests. Specifically, the current research addresses questions of how African American and Latino high school juniors and seniors from several urban districts perceive, gather information on, and prepare for standardized college admission tests.

METHOD

Qualitative methods, such as interviews, can provide insight into how individuals understand issues including standardized testing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Such methods also allow for the incorporation of underrepresented groups' perspectives and voices in research (Freeman, 1997, 1999; Tierney, 1993). The voices of African American and Latino youth, particularly from urban areas, have been conspicuously absent from educational debates about their achievement and experiences (Kaplan, 1999; Lattimore, 2001). The interview data for this article are drawn from a larger study of 227 African American and Latino high school juniors and seniors' college choice processes in three counties in Southern California.

California, which enrolls 14% of U.S. undergraduates (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2001), is one of the states that in recent years banned affirmative action, and African American and Latino enrollment at the University of California campuses plummeted following the ban (Gose & Selingo, 2001). Although the students interviewed for the current study came from just three counties—

Los Angeles, Riverside, and Orange—these counties are highly urbanized and produce approximately one half of all African American and Latino high school graduates in the state. A team of researchers asked students many questions regarding their college choices and decisions during the interviews. One question specifically asked students what they knew about standardized college admission tests, including the PSAT, SAT I, SAT II, and ACT, and how they received their information. Students often were asked to clarify or elaborate on their responses; however, the interviewers did not ask students specifically whether they had taken these tests, what their scores had been, or how they prepared for the tests. Yet many students discussed these college admission tests at length when asked what they knew about them and the sources from which they received information. The data students provided in response to that specific interview question were analyzed for this article.

Students were interviewed individually and in focus groups in the fall of 1998, their junior or senior year of high school. These students and the schools they attended met specific criteria for inclusion in the current study. Eligible students were enrolled in college preparatory courses in their urban high schools at the time of the study. Three criteria were utilized to determine school eligibility: the school enrolled large percentages of underrepresented minorities; the school had high percentages of students taking the necessary courses for admission to the University of California (UC); and yet the school had low numbers of students eligible for admission to a UC, or had low percentages of students of color eligible for admission at a UC. Thus, these selection criteria purposefully included students whose schooling was, in some way, inadequate.

Thirty-one seniors were interviewed individually, with the remaining 86 seniors and all 110 juniors interviewed in focus groups, typically consisting of four to six students. The interviews took place within the students' schools during students' free periods or before or after the school day. Individual interviews were approximately 1 hour long, and the focus groups were 1½ to 2 hours long. Interviewing some students individually allowed for a greater depth and understanding of the individual's process, while

the focus groups increased access to students whose opinions and perceptions were important to the study. Interviews were taped and transcribed on an ongoing basis.

Deductive and inductive coding schemes were developed, and NUD*IST, a computer program for qualitative data, was utilized to code the data. First, a deductive coding scheme based on the interview protocols and on the Bourdieuan conceptual framework was developed and utilized. Following this initial coding, the senior research team reviewed selected interview transcripts and NUD*IST reports to allow patterns to emerge independently from the data. The data for this article followed this pattern, and students' initial discussions of standardized college admission tests during the interviews were coded under a heading titled Standardized Tests in NUD*IST. We then reviewed the data and inductively coded for themes emerging from the students' responses. The patterns and categories in the students' knowledge and understanding of standardized admission tests clustered in four major areas. Those areas included issues of information, preparation, test-taking strategies, and beliefs and anxieties regarding the tests' fairness.

RESULTS

INFORMATION

All students were asked what they knew about the PSAT, SAT I, SAT II, ACT, and about the source of their information. Many of these college-bound students, including many seniors, lacked significant specific knowledge regarding the tests they were required to take, the scores actually required for admission, and the time frame in which colleges required scores. One senior, when asked about the SAT, was perilously uninformed. He told the interviewer the SAT "helps you to get into college . . . it depends on what percentage you get, right? . . . You have to do them, right?" A Latino senior, who was in several advanced placement classes his senior year, did not know about the SAT until the fall of his senior year when he overheard his classmates discussing their scores. He said,

“They [asked] me ‘Are you taking the SAT’s?’ and I said ‘What’s that?’ . . . They already knew everything and had taken them four times. . . . I asked one of the students ‘What’s the SAT?’” Another senior knew about the test but was unsure of the time frame. She told the interviewer, “All I know is you’ve got to take them. I’m not sure about when you need to.”

Many of the juniors also recognized the importance of the tests; however, some, not unexpectedly, had even less information than seniors regarding the exams and timelines. One junior told the interviewer, “They say you have to score big . . . [to] get in.” When asked by the interviewer if she had taken any of the tests, another junior replied, “I think I have. I’m not really sure.” A third junior, when asked about the tests, told an interviewer, “I’m confused.” A fourth said, “I don’t really know what [the test] is about.”

Students also relied on school officials for knowledge about standardized admission tests and applying for college. When asked about the sources of their information on admissions tests, only seven students mentioned their parents. Counselors and teachers were mentioned most often, although six students referred to outreach programs, and several others mentioned older siblings who were already in college. One student said, “The college counselor . . . tries to get it out there, [to] let the students know this is the deadline for the . . . SAT and you need to take this.” Another student told the interviewer, “Our counselor [said] you need to prepare and study hard.” A third student believed, “My teachers push me, my math teacher . . . English . . . they all push us.” Still another student said, “The 12th-grade counselor . . . gives us the dates and the . . . registration deadline, fees, and information about how to take the test.”

Older siblings often played a significant role in knowledge acquisition. One student had substantial information “‘cause my sister took the SAT twice . . . she took all the tests.” Another student, a young Latina, said, “My sister’s told me a lot about the SATs, the scoring, knowing exactly where you stand . . . so . . . my sister mostly has told me.” One African American senior said he “talked to basically my teachers and my brother, and they said I should take it [the SAT] . . . ’cuz that’s what a lot of colleges require.”

When available, outreach programs, whether community based or state sponsored, similarly provided information to students about tests and applying for college. One student attended a state-funded summer program, "They gave us seminars on what we need to know to get into the UC system." Another student who was a junior at the time of the interview attended a church-based outreach program that "told us that to get into the UC, you have to take the SAT I and the SAT II."

So the African American and Latino students in these urban public schools struggled with getting basic, timely information about admission tests, understanding the tests' importance, when and how often to take them. Moreover, because most did not have college-educated parents, these students were dependent on their schools for test information, although sometimes they serendipitously received information from older siblings or the occasional outreach program. Although counselors and teachers were mentioned most often, from an equity standpoint, there was little systematic school-based information.

PREPARATION

When students understood that they needed to take the tests and knew which tests to take, the next hurdle was to prepare for the tests. Although students were not specifically asked about preparation, they discussed preparation in more than one half of the focus groups and more than one third of the individual interviews. Most students mentioning preparation said they needed to study and prepare for the tests, and many studied on their own using preparation books they either purchased or borrowed. One student used a "workbook that actually helped . . . on the test." Another student got "books with different practice tests . . . so when you do take the test, you won't be surprised." A third student said about preparing, "I really have to like sit down and like study." A senior told the interviewer, "I have two test books, so I just take the practice tests." Some students, however, continued to be disadvantaged by a lack of material resources, even when trying to study on their own. One young woman mentioned that a friend had been able to use a CD-

ROM to prepare but said, "I don't own a computer so . . . this whole technology thing is like horrible for me."

Virtually none of the students interviewed had access to private coaching or commercial preparation courses, such as Princeton Review. One student explained she was not taking such a course because "it costs a lot." Twenty-one students (9% of all students), however, specifically mentioned access to some preparation services through their schools, churches, and outreach programs with area universities. One student explained that she "went to the SAT, ACT preparation workshop. It was here at school for 2 hours." Another student said a preparation course was held "right here for free in [our] high school . . . that's an opportunity, so I came." A third student mentioned that a local community college had "this SAT prep class . . . anybody can come up there for free. They help them out." Some students also took classes through outreach programs, such as Upward Bound or state-funded programs.

So a few African American and Latino students in the current study did have access to some test preparation, although the quality is totally unknown. From student reports, the test preparation they had seemed limited in duration (compared to what is commercially available); the only other resources noted were the occasional test prep book. Very few students utilized the technology-intensive or high-quality commercial test preparation services, either because they were unaware of such services or because they did not have access to such services. Again, there was little systematic preparation for these tests, nor was there any evidence of equity in the coaching efforts that existed.

STRATEGIES FOR TAKING ADMISSION TESTS

Utilizing the resources available to them, most students prepared and took the admission tests, often repeatedly. Again, students were not asked expressly about their strategies, yet in almost 40% of the focus groups and individual interviews, students talked about taking these admission tests multiple times. They did this because they believed their standardized test scores needed to be higher than their initial results and that their admission to desired colleges hinged, in part, on their test scores. Students took the exam

over and over, hoping to raise their scores through familiarity, despite concerns about cost. One senior told the interviewer that she believed low scores “encourages us to take it as many times as possible . . . [so] that we can raise our scores.” Another student who had taken the SAT twice already was planning “to take it at least two more times and build up my scores.” A third said, “They [school officials] basically tell us to take everything at least twice . . . to get a . . . feel for it.”

This strategy of taking the test over and over meant that students had to find a way to pay for taking the tests multiple times. One student said, “With all the college applications and those tests . . . if you’re not running yourself broke, you’re running your parents broke.” Four students believed tests should be free. One young woman said, “They should offer at least one test for free.” A male student told the interviewer, “It should be free, all the tests . . . it costs a lot of money after you bill it up.” Several students, however, mentioned that fee waivers were available to them, reducing or eliminating the cost of the test. Characteristic of these students was one who said the school counselor uses fee waivers as “little incentives for the students . . . that really pulls in a lot [of students].”

Similar to most admissions test takers in the United States today, these African American and Latino students seemed to have the relevant cultural capital to know that taking admission tests multiple times was an important strategy for trying to improve one’s scores (Gose & Selingo, 2001). However, given the substandard education students received, and without high-quality preparation or coaching, it is difficult to say what this repeat testing accomplished. Second, these students were concerned about the high cost of taking the test multiple times, even while some admitted that they sought out and used fee waivers to try and reduce the impact of those high costs.

ISSUES OF ANXIETY AND FAIRNESS

Many American teenagers, including the African American and Latino high school students in the current study, undoubtedly view the standardized tests required for college admission as difficult and unfair and are anxious about taking these tests and about

achieving scores that are high enough (Schwartz, 1999). Anxiety about taking the admission tests or about scoring well was an issue raised in almost one half of all focus groups and individual interviews. One student told the interviewer, "One test shouldn't really matter." Another student believed, "It's not fair." A third student did not believe tests "should be . . . used . . . because . . . you could just be a bad test taker."

Five students said they were afraid of the tests. One young man said he was "scared of tests . . . I get very, you know, scared." Another young man said, "I get nervous testing, and I could study all week and just know everything, and then when it comes time for the test, my palms get all sweaty, and I forget everything." A young woman said she had taken a test preparation course but was still "really scared" of taking the test.

Students said they knew the tests were difficult and that they needed high scores, and in many cases students desired extremely high scores. One young man believed, "They're all killer tests." Another student told the interviewer, "Everybody say[s] . . . it's hard." A junior said, "It's very difficult and you really have to focus."

A senior stated, "My first time I got a 1070 . . . [which is] so low." Several students believed that to be accepted into a college, they needed particular SAT scores. One said, "There is a certain cut-off . . . if you just don't have this score, you just can't get in." A female student told the interviewer she "heard . . . that if you get a score like better than 1100 . . . that's good, but they [colleges] want the really high scores."

Several of the African American and Latino students were concerned about the radical discrepancies between their dream schools and the schools that were within their reach given their SAT scores. One young woman was concerned because she took the SAT and "got a 870, and that's just not decent to me; my goal is a 1300." A young man had similar aspirations, "For me, I've set . . . a 1300 SAT . . . whether or not this is fancy or reality . . . I should be able to score somewhere within the 12s . . . but I took my SATs in June, and I got a 970." There seemed to be no awareness on the part of the students that gains of 300 to 400 points were virtually impossible on

these tests. Alternatively, these students seemed to be completely unaware, unlike their high-SES counterparts, that there were other selective schools that might rely less on high SAT scores (McDonough, 1994).

Achieving scores that students believed were high enough to get into college or to get into the college of their choice put a great deal of pressure on these students. One said, "It's too much stress on us already . . . it's not worth it." Another said the SAT made her "stress out" and that "it makes me feel incompetent." Yet another student found the tests "frustrating . . . when the day comes to an end, all you think about is the SAT scores and how you're gonna get into college. And so it's really hard."

Moreover, six students raised the issue of test bias on the SAT or ACT. These students understood that, as underrepresented minorities, they did not score well as a group on the SAT or ACT. One senior believed, "The SAT is racially biased or ethnically or . . . culturally biased." A junior also believed tests are "biased to minorities." A young woman recognized that "statistically we score lower. We, being a minority, score lower on SATs." Two students believed the ACT was a better test for them to take as students of color. One said, "I've heard that the ACT is supposed to be the same [type of] test, but minorities score higher on it." A senior said she heard the ACT is "easier for African Americans . . . that's what they say." Finally, one senior tied test scores, college admissions, and affirmative action together. She was not satisfied with her test scores saying, "I did bad . . . but I'm gonna practice and try and do the best that I can." Although she wanted to be admitted into a selective university, she begrudgingly admitted that she might significantly lower her expectations, "If I don't, there's always junior college . . . it's just hard now . . . because we don't have affirmative action."

The African American and Latino students in the current study were woefully lacking the knowledge of what is possible in terms of raising one's scores, as well as knowledge of alternative strategies for selective admissions. They had a self-consciousness about the unfairness and biases of the SATs but were completely silent on the inequity of how their K-12 educational experiences had failed to adequately prepare them for the college admission contest.

DISCUSSION

Overall, these African American and Latino high school students were very concerned about taking standardized admission tests and scoring well enough to be admitted to the college of their choice. Students felt a great deal of pressure; some felt the tests were unjust and were not hopeful about their chances of scoring well. Despite the perceived impediments, many students tried to take the SAT and ACT and score well because college attendance was so important. Their test-taking strategies involved availing themselves of whatever free or low-cost preparation assistance was offered and taking the tests over and over again.

These strategies constitute an element in the students' habitus. Similar to their high-SES White and Asian American counterparts, the African American and Latino students' strategies included familiarizing themselves with the tests by taking it repeatedly. Although this strategy might result in modest test score gains, significant score increases will only result from a more in-depth knowledge of the material (Schwartz, 1999), particularly given the students' attendance at inadequate K-12 schools. Test preparation courses may assist in promoting that knowledge; however, many of the courses students mentioned were several hours long or were held on one Saturday. Most commercial test prep providers know that little or no significant learning or retention occurs after a brief, single intervention workshop (Schwartz, 1999).

Although it makes sense that students choose this option because it is what is available and affordable to them, it may not benefit them as much as an extended in-depth program could. In this way, then, these students' habitus and the resources available to them are leading them to utilize a strategy that may be less successful than they desire. Moreover, the limits of their habitus mean that these African American and Latino students are unaware of alternative strategies that other, high-SES White and Asian American students are utilizing, such as looking for colleges where SAT scores do not carry as much influence in admissions decisions (McDonough, 1994). Many students, however, lacked the resources for, or information on, other preparation strategies or

other colleges, and lacked information on standardized tests in general, relying on school personnel to provide it.

It is no surprise that the African American and Latino students in the current study needed more information on the tests because past research has found that these groups of high school students lack the specific knowledge necessary to successfully enroll in a college or university, which would include knowledge about college admission tests (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Horvat, 1995; Smith, 2001). This knowledge is a form of cultural capital to which students from high-SES families have greater access (Horvat, 1995; McDonough, 1997). Because African American and Latino high school students are disproportionately from low-SES families, they often lack this particular cultural capital and are disadvantaged in the test-taking and college-going processes. In Bourdieuan terms, then, knowledge regarding standardized admission tests is a form of cultural capital, and although prior research has shown that knowledge of the college admission process was a form of cultural capital (Horvat, 1995; McDonough, 1997), specific knowledge regarding admission tests was not explored in-depth.

Furthermore, a lack of information, lack of resources to pay for college admission tests, lack of test preparation, and the pressure these students feel to perform well result in admission test requirements becoming a barrier to college attendance for the African American and Latino students in the current study. Results from Freeman's (1997) study illustrated some of the obstacles African American students perceived when considering college and documented that students' perceptions of obstacles may hinder their participation. The current study indicates that students perceive the tests as obstacles, and those perceptions can, in turn, hinder their participation. This should be sufficient reason to deemphasize standardized admission testing.

Students' perceptions of the tests as unfair, particularly for underrepresented students of color, also have connotations for the new line of research on stereotype threat (Aronson, Justina, Good, et al., 1999; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 1998). Several students in the current study, without being asked specifically, said they had heard or believed the admission tests were biased and that they would not score as well as their peers

because they were African American or Latino. This is exactly the type of internalized stereotype that Steele and his colleagues (Aronson, Justina, Good, et al., 1999; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995, 1998) believed results in lower test scores. Furthermore, although some psychometric research shows that admission test questions are not biased (Freedle & Kostin, 1990; Scheuneman & Gerritz, 1990), students believe the tests are unfair, and that perception can shape how students respond to the tests.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

Undoubtedly, students of all races and ethnicities are concerned and feel pressured by standardized admission test requirements, and some may feel the tests are unfair. In this regard, the African American and Latino students in the current study may not differ radically from their White or Asian American peers. However, the perceptions of the current study's students are critical because, as a group, their lower-than-average scores jeopardize their already limited participation in higher education (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Carter & Wilson, 1996; Duran, 1994; Freeman, 1997, 1999; Hacker, 1992; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998; Miller, 1995; Nettles, 1991; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Vars & Bowen, 1998).

Obviously these students need more and clearer information regarding what tests to take and when to take them as well as more in-depth preparation. First, regarding information needs, from an equity standpoint, systematic school-based information needs to be provided on college admission tests including the following: the tests' importance, deadlines, how to understand the varying valuations that different colleges put on these tests, and how to interpret the meaning of one's own scores. Second, although they were not asked about test preparation specifically, only 9% of these 227 African American and Latino students mentioned having access to preparation services such as workshops or courses, which were of an unknown quantity and quality. Clearly, there is an urgent need for systematic assistance with test preparation. Third, students

need to be informed about the possibilities and promise of fee waivers and of taking the tests multiple times. Finally, students need to be informed about the strategies available for increasing their scores. However, none of these proposed remedies speak to the issue of the appalling quality of most K-12 urban schools that are serving large numbers of African American and Latino students, which is the real obstacle to improving college admission test performance and subsequently, college attendance rates.

Practitioners, policy makers, and researchers, first and foremost, need to address the inequities faced by most K-12 urban schools and try to ameliorate them. However, because students clearly perceive these tests as barriers, and because those perceptions may limit their participation, policy makers also need to question the use of standardized tests in the admission process. As long as testing is an admission requirement, timely, in-depth preparation may assist these students in raising their scores.

Researchers may want to investigate the breadth and depth of the free or low-cost in-school preparation students in the current study mentioned, particularly given Powers' (1998) finding that many high schools are offering admission test preparation courses at no cost. Although test preparation obviously cannot substitute for a quality K-12 education, for low-SES students and students of color who often do not have access to such an education (Duran, 1994; Ferguson, 1998a, 1998b; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 1985; Solarzano, 1992a, 1992b), high quality, in-depth test preparation may assist in raising scores. Research comparing the preparation received by low-SES urban students and that of other student groups, including White and Asian American students in higher SES schools, may illuminate further equity issues. Researchers could investigate the effectiveness of different information sources, such as church-based organizations and outreach programs for students. Additional research on other elements of habitus or cultural capital may be fruitful as well.

Moreover, researchers should continue investigating the causes of admission test-score discrepancies. Although researchers have tried to address these discrepancies, the differences in test scores and participation rates have remained. Perhaps gaining insight into the students' perspectives will enable educators and researchers to

raise test scores for African Americans and Latinos and increase their college attendance and graduation rates as long as tests are required. In addition, insights into students' perspectives may provide the information necessary to deemphasize or eliminate the tests as an admission's requirement.

Students' perspectives also may be important to research on stereotype threat. Researchers should investigate students' perspectives prior to and during actual testing situations to understand the threat, how it is operationalized in these situations, and whether its effects can be eradicated. Recent studies (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003) suggest that changing the way students view intelligence can reduce the effects of stereotype threat and increase academic achievement. Good and her colleagues (Good et al., 2003) utilized mentoring in enabling students' increased achievement, a finding that could be important for practitioners. Perhaps mentors or mentoring programs could assist high school students in raising their admissions test scores.

The African American and Latino students' views and beliefs in the current study are particularly important to policy makers because the data were gathered following California's ban on affirmative action, which increased the salience of students' scores. Although the U.S. Supreme Court recently upheld the use of race, the Court narrowed its application and questioned whether there should be a specific timeline for ending affirmative action altogether. Many critics of affirmative action have vowed to continue to fight its use, even the narrow application allowed by the Court. Moreover, in particular states, statutes still prohibit the use of affirmative action. Thus, the controversy surrounding affirmative action will continue, and admission test score gaps will continue to be scrutinized. Policy makers must carefully consider the ruling and the continued challenges in shaping policy affecting access and equity in postsecondary education.

One possible solution to the gaps in admission test scores and the barrier they present for African American and Latino students is to utilize a more content-based test such as the SAT II: Subject Test or the ACT. These tests are designed to measure specific content knowledge, rather than the abstract reasoning skills that the SAT I is designed to measure (Bridgeman, Burton, & Cline, 2003).

Although Bridgeman et al. (2003) found that relying on the SAT II exams could increase Latino participation, other researchers have found that test score gaps mirroring those on the SAT I exist on the SAT II and the ACT (MacGowen, 2002; Perez, 2002). ETS and The College Board decided to revise the SAT I Verbal and Math components, while adding a writing component (Bollinger, 2002; Perez, 2002). These changes, when introduced in 2005, will make the SAT I more content based and less a test of reasoning ability. Researchers should explore any test score gap between African American and Latino students on the one hand and White and Asian American students on the other when results from the revised SAT I become available.

Ultimately, only raising scores or deemphasizing the use of standardized admission tests will increase African American and Latino participation in higher education. Because high school grades and class rank have consistently been shown to be better predictors of college success (Perez, 2002), practitioners, including college admissions officers, could rely more heavily on those indicators. Although it remains to be seen whether the new SAT I will be a better predictor than high school grades and class rank, the current underrepresentation of African American and Latino students can be addressed by simply relying on information that is already available and required for most applications. Furthermore, deemphasizing test scores may help ease the anxiety surrounding the current college admissions process, which would, in turn, benefit all students.

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MaryBeth Walpole is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership Department at Rowan University. She received her Ph.D. in higher education and organizational change from UCLA.

Patricia M. McDonough is an associate professor in the Higher Education and Organizational Change Division at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA.

Constance J. Bauer is a middle school principal in Gloucester Township, NJ, and received her doctorate in educational leadership from Rowan University.

Carolyn Gibson is an assistant superintendent in Trenton, NJ, and a doctoral student at Rowan University in the Educational Leadership Department.

Kamau Kanyi works at a nonprofit family organization in Philadelphia and is a doctoral student at Rowan University in the Educational Leadership Department.

Rita Toliver is the assistant dean of Student Support Services at Peirce College in Philadelphia and a doctoral student at Rowan University in the Educational Leadership Department.