

Bilingual students have edge on exam

Possible cultural bias in SAT II language test

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Latino and Asian students who speak a second language at home may have an advantage in getting into the University of California and other institutions, testing and education experts say — and African American students may be the losers in the equation.

Many colleges and universities across the country allow the SAT II language achievement test to be used in admissions, considering it along with grades and the SAT I verbal and math aptitude tests.

According to data from the College Board, which administers the SAT, Latino and Asian students in California do significantly better on the language exams than white and African American students.

Possible cultural bias

"I'm not sure if this was by design or by lack of proper planning, but it seems to me that we really have built in a cultural bias," said UC Regent Ward Connerly, who was one of the architects of the state's 1996 voter-approved ban on affirmative action.

Connerly, who said he would raise the issue at today's regents meeting in San Francisco, said the impact might be especially severe on African American students because they had no similar language advantage. In addition, they often attend poor schools that do not adequately prepare them for the other subjects.

A new eligibility index places twice as much weight on the SAT II achievement exams as on the SAT I basic aptitude exams. Connerly questioned the conclusion reached by UC representatives, who said the change had a minuscule impact on the ethnic composition of the entering class.

Last year, Latino students had an average score of 691 out of 800 on the Spanish exam; the average was 550 for whites and 494 for African Americans. Similarly, Asians scored an average of 697 on the Japanese test, while whites had an average of 540, and African Americans had a 507 average.

The admissions process

All students applying to UC have to take the SAT I aptitude tests, as well as SAT II math and writing achievement tests. They have to choose a third subject from among 18 achievement tests, including languages. The three achievement tests are counted equally.

Latino and Asian students generally score much higher on the optional language exam than those students taking other subjects for the third exam.

African Americans scored an average of 529 in biology, 452 in world history and 493 in literature last year. Whites scored an average of 590 in biology, 543 in world history and 574 in literature.

"There should be similar opportunities for all students in the admissions process, and the cur-

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rent formula does not provide that for African American students," said Marc Bernstein, president of K-12 learning services for test preparation company Kaplan Inc.

The advantage of the language tests for bilingual students are recognized by many. A Korean test was added in 1997 after the Korean consumer electronics company Samsung funded the \$500,000 it costs the College Board to develop a new exam.

Not "equal things"

"I don't think it is fair because people don't grow up naturally knowing biology," said Tiffany Wang, 17, a senior at Fountain Valley High School near Irvine, who scored a 740 out of 800 on the SAT II biology exam. "They can't use them as equal things when they don't start from equal places."

David Benjamin, who runs a test preparation business in Irvine, said it was "unofficial affirmative action."

"They are taking a test designed for kids who learned it in high school," he said. "If you grew up speaking Spanish, it is easy. The differences can't be made up on the other sections."

But UC spokesman Brad Hayward said that the 13 percent increase in Latino admission this year was largely a result of a new program that automatically admits the top 4 percent of every high school, stepped-up outreach efforts and a growing college-age Latino population.

According to the College Board, the language exams are academic tests that assess a mastery of vocabulary, grammar and diction and reading comprehension skills — skills that students may not pick up just learning the language at home.

Struggles with test

Indeed, Sayaka Matsumoto, 18, who graduated from St. Mary's High School in Berkeley in June, said she had struggled on the exam even though she grew up speaking Japanese at home.

She scored a 680. She got about 600 on the math and writing exams.

"I did well on the listening part because we speak it at home, but I had a lot of trouble in the reading and writing," she said. "We just speak it at home, we don't practice the reading and writing and grammar that you would learn in a classroom."

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SAT II language gap

Latino and Asian students are scoring higher on the SAT II language test than white or African American students. Some critics say that students who speak a second language at home have an unfair leg up in getting into the University of California and other universities across the country that use the test in admissions.

WHITE		
Foreign languages	Total	2000 Score
Chinese w/listening component	6	590
Japanese w/listening component	27	540
Spanish	2,122	550
Spanish w/listening component	347	568
Korean w/listening component	0	0

AFRICAN AMERICAN		
Foreign languages	Total	2000 Score
Chinese w/listening component	3	787
Japanese w/listening component	7	507
Spanish	245	494
Spanish w/listening component	39	532
Korean w/listening component	4	675

ASIAN		
Foreign languages	Total	2000 Score
Chinese w/listening component	2,330	744
Japanese w/listening component	337	697
Spanish	1,280	529
Spanish w/listening component	229	541
Korean w/listening component	1,278	730

LATINOS		
Foreign languages	Total	2000 Score
Chinese w/listening component	1	600
Japanese w/listening component	7	556
Spanish	3,938	691
Spanish w/listening component	1,083	689
Korean w/listening component	2	645

Source: The College Board