

The Misguided War on the SAT

Colleges have fled standardized tests, on the theory that they hurt diversity. That's not what the research shows.



By David Leonhardt

David Leonhardt has been reporting on opportunity in higher education for more than two decades.

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Interesting way to say that 85 or more percent of colleges have allowed students the choice whether to submit scores or not. It says a lot about what schools he thinks are worth discussing and represent "colleges"

After the Covid pandemic made it difficult for high school students to take the SAT and ACT, dozens of selective colleges dropped their requirement that applicants do so. Colleges described the move as temporary, but nearly all have since stuck to a test-optional policy. It reflects a backlash against standardized tests that began long before the pandemic, and many people have hailed the change as a victory for equity in higher education.

neither of these properly frame the almost 100 years of pro and con research. The idea that research that is Pro-test is increasing and research that is anti test isn't is unsubstantiated and is supported by all the research I've seen in recent years.

Now, though, a growing number of experts and university administrators wonder whether the switch has been a mistake. Research has increasingly shown that standardized test scores contain real information, helping to predict college grades, chances of graduation and post-college success. Test scores are more reliable than high school grades, partly because of grade inflation in recent years.

Without test scores, admissions officers sometimes have a hard time distinguishing between applicants who are likely to do well at elite colleges and those who are likely to struggle. Researchers who have studied the issue say that test scores can be particularly helpful in identifying lower-income students and underrepresented minorities who will thrive. These students do not score as high on average as students from affluent communities or white and Asian students. But a solid score for a student from a less privileged background is often a sign of enormous potential.

So many issues in one paragraph. Admissions offices have a hard time at these schools because if you signal that only straight As get in and all your applicants get straight As of course its hard.

But this is not an issue of who is likely to succeed, its an issue of sorting and selection. The research they cite distinguishes between GPAs all of which are above 3. getting a 3.2, 3.3, or 3.4 in college does not indicate struggling or failure.

“Standardized test scores are a much better predictor of academic success than high school grades,” Christina Paxson, the president of Brown University, recently wrote. Stuart Schmill — the dean of admissions at M.I.T., one of the few schools to have reinstated its test requirement — told me, “Just getting straight A’s is not enough information for us to know whether the students are going to succeed or not.”

one thing these comments and studies seem to ignore is that grades are range restricted. many/most GPAs are recalculated to limit all student grades to the A - F / 4.0 scale. so AP courses factor in but not in GPA calculations. so grades restricted. The SAT /ACT are engineered to create differences. If the tests stop creating mostly arbitrary distinctions they recenter/redesign/tweak the tests . . so of course grades at places that demand all As are going to show less distinction than a tool designed to create the appearance of difference (even when there isn't one)

An academic study released last summer by the group Opportunity Insights, covering the so-called Ivy Plus colleges (the eight in the Ivy League, along with Duke, M.I.T., Stanford and the University of Chicago), showed little relationship between high school grade point average and success in college. The researchers found a strong relationship between test scores and later success.

Likewise, a faculty committee at the University of California system — led by Dr. Henry Sánchez, a pathologist, and Eddie Comeaux, a professor of education — concluded in 2020 that test scores were better than high school grades at predicting student success in the system’s nine colleges, where more than 230,000 undergraduates are enrolled. The relative advantage of test scores has grown over time, the committee found.

“Test scores have vastly more predictive power than is commonly understood in the popular debate,” said John Friedman, an economics professor at Brown and one of the authors of the Ivy Plus admissions study.

With the Supreme Court’s restriction of affirmative action last year, emotions around college admissions are running high. The debate over standardized testing has become caught up in deeper questions about inequality in America and what purpose, ultimately, the nation’s universities should serve.

But the data suggests that testing critics have drawn the wrong battle lines. If test scores are used as one factor among others — and if colleges give applicants credit for having overcome adversity — the SAT and ACT can help create diverse classes of highly talented students. Restoring the tests might also help address a different frustration that many Americans have with the admissions process at elite universities: that it has become too opaque and unconnected to merit.

'Picking Up Fundamentals'

Given the data, why haven't colleges reinstated their test requirements?

For one thing, standardized tests are easy to dislike. They create stress for millions of teenagers. The tests seem to reduce the talent and potential of a human being to a single number. The SAT's original name, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, implied a rigor that even its current defenders would not claim. Covid, in short, created an opportunity for American society to cast off a tradition that few people enjoyed.

But **another part of the explanation involves politics**. Standardized tests have become especially unpopular among political progressives, and university campuses are dominated by progressives.

Many consider the tests to be unfair because there are score gaps by race and class. Average scores for modest-income, Black and Hispanic students are lower than those for white, Asian and upper-income students. The tests' critics worry that reinstating test requirements will reduce diversity. The Supreme Court's affirmative action decision has heightened these concerns.

If selective colleges made admissions decisions based solely on test scores, racial and economic diversity would indeed plummet. Yet almost nobody in higher education favors using tests as the main factor for admissions. The question instead is whether the scores should be one of the criteria used to identify qualified students from every demographic group.

The SAT's history offers **some complex perspective**. As the test's critics sometimes point out, **one designer** of the original standardized tests in the early 20th century, Carl Brigham, also wrote a book promoting racist theories of intelligence (which he later disavowed). But **a larger rationale** for tests was connected to an expansion of opportunity. Administrators at Harvard, who pushed for the creation of the tests, saw them as a way to identify talented students from any background. The administrators believed that these students would go on to strengthen the

expert equivocation

Damn near all of them were.

Suspect at best. Harvard's "scholarship test admitted 10 students per year. that's hardly opening doors.

country's elite institutions, which were dominated by a narrow group of white Protestants, as Nicholas Lemann explained in "The Big Test," his history of the SAT.

this gets repeated a lot but .. its never been quantified. The Opportunity Insights work tries most to quantify it by telling us that 24% comes from athletics, 46% of the advantage comes from legacy and 31% from stronger extracurriculars, but that leaves nothing to come from the SAT.

Today, perhaps the strongest argument in favor of the tests is that other parts of the admissions process have **even larger** racial and economic biases. Affluent students can participate in expensive activities, like music lessons and travel sports teams, that strengthen their applications. These same students often receive extensive editing on their essays from their well-educated parents. Many affluent students attend private schools where counselors polish each student's application.

The tests are not entirely objective, of course. Well-off students can pay for test prep classes and can pay to take the tests multiple times. Yet the evidence suggests that these advantages cause a very small part of the gaps.

Consider that other measures of learning — like the NAEP, a test that elementary and middle school students take nationwide — show similarly large racial and economic gaps. The federal government describes the NAEP as "the nation's report card," while education researchers consider it a rigorous measure of K-12 learning. And even though students do not take NAEP test prep classes, its demographic gaps look remarkably similar to those of the ACT and SAT.

This similarity "is another piece of evidence that the SAT is **picking up fundamentals,**" said Raj Chetty, a Harvard economics professor who conducted the recent Ivy Plus study with Friedman and David Deming. "It strengthens the argument that the disparities in **SAT scores are a symptom, not a cause, of inequality in the U.S.,**" Chetty said.

STRAWMAN.. who claims SATs cause inequality? maybe exacerbate. maybe perpetuate i dont think anyone says cause. maybe cause inequality in college admissions.

To put it another way, the existence of racial and economic gaps in SAT and ACT scores doesn't prove that the tests are biased. After all, most measures of life in America — on income, life expectancy, homeownership and more — show gaps. No wonder: Our society suffers from huge inequities. The problem isn't generally with the statistics, however. The relatively high Black poverty rate is not a sign that the statistic is biased. Nor would scrapping the statistic alleviate poverty.

A Fixed Benchmark

ignoring contradictory studies is guess is a way to prove your point.

The data documenting the predictive power of standardized tests **is extensive and growing**. In the study of Ivy Plus colleges, Chetty, Deming and Friedman looked at several measures of college success, such as whether students did well enough to earn admission to a top graduate school or be hired by a desirable company.

Standardized test scores were a good predictor. High school grades were much less

so:

THE IVY LEAGUE IS NOT "COLLEGE"

2023: Why Test-Optional and Other Test-Light Options Have Worked So Well in College Admissions
Sternberg, Robert. College and University; Washington Vol. 98, Iss. 3, (Summer 2023): 37-44.
- Test-optional admissions has worked well, better than perhaps many admissions officers and registrars ever expected. Why? Standardized test scores have long been a cornerstone of the admissions process for most selective colleges and universities. How could these institutions do so well without the scores? This article discusses why.

-<https://www.aera.net/Newsroom/Research-Finds-that-High-School-GPAs-Are-Stronger-Predictors-of-College-Graduation-than-ACT-Scores>

2022: Effects of Test-Optional Admissions on Underrepresented Minority Enrollment and Graduation by Trevor Osaki, University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB)
- Argues that test-optional admissions policy raises the rate of enrollment for under-represented minority freshman, but leads to a decline in graduation for less-selective colleges and no change in "the most selective colleges". Research spans 2001/2002 - 2019/2020.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2020/01/29/its-gpas-not-standardized-tests-that-predict-college-success/?sh=41cf275632bd>

2022: The Impact of Optional: Investigating the Effects of Test-Optional Admissions Policies by Joseph H. Paris (West Chester University), Benjamin Torsney (Temple University), Sara Fiorot (Temple University), Catherine Pressimone Beckowski (Temple University)
- Argues that while test-optional admissions policy leads to an increase in applications and enrolled students, it doesn't necessarily lead to a significant increase in students of color, and pell grant recipients. This research sets out to expand the number and type of "test-optional institutions" that are discussed in test optional research.

<https://uwm.edu/sreed/wp-content/uploads/sites/502/2020/05/GU-Predictive-measures-of-postsecondary-success.pdf>

<https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/predicting-college-success-how-do-different-high-school-assessments-measure-2019> (UC Davis)

2021: Untested Admissions: Examining Changes in Application Behaviors and Student Demographics Under Test-Optional Policies by Christopher T. Bennett (Vanderbilt University)
- Exploring admissions during 2005/2006 and 2015/2016, the research found that test optional policies led to a 3% to 4% increase in Pell Grant recipients, a 10% to 12% increase in first time students from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, and a 6% to 8% increase in first time enrollment of women. However, they "do not detect clear evidence of changes in application volume or yield rate."

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/confirmed-high-school-gpas-predict-college-success/> (Hiss (Bowdoin) study, done for NACAC)

Alaska: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/northwest/Publication/3835#:~:text=This%20report%20is%20a%20companion,directly%20in%20college%2Dlevel%20courses.>

2021: Applying to college in a test-optional admissions landscape: trends from Common App data by Mark Freeman, Preston Magouirk, Trent Kajikawa
- Focusing on 2021 test takers, the report explores how the rate of students submitting scores shifted in this year, as well as how the number of submitted scores shifted based on communities. The authors found a large drop in scores submitted, and found that first generation applicants and applicants from underrepresented minorities were less likely to report. In addition, more selective colleges were more likely to receive scores.

2021: Test-Optional Admissions Policies: Evidence from Implementations Pre- and Post-Covid 19 by Laura Schultz
- The authors examined test optional policies both before and after Covid, and set about analyzing data collected regarding how Covid affected test score submissions, and how test-optional policies affected SUNY enrollment and admissions.

2014: Defining Promise: Optional Standardized Testing Policies in American College and University Admissions by William C. Hiss and Valerie W. Franks
- The research found that "Few significant differences between submitters and non-submitters of testing were observed in Cumulative GPAs and graduation rates, despite significant differences in SAT/ACT scores. Optional testing policies also help build broader access to higher education: non-submitters are more likely to be first-generation-to-college students, minorities, Pell Grant recipients, women and students with Learning Differences."

2019: SAT optional policies: Do they influence graduate quality, selectivity or diversity? - ScienceDirect

Test scores are strong predictors of student outcomes after college

Attending an elite graduate school

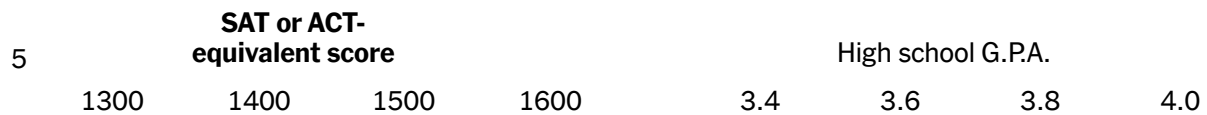
25% the study is really narrow in what constitutes success.. but of course I

Test scores are more predictive than high school grades of post-college outcomes.

20

15

10



Working at a prestigious firm

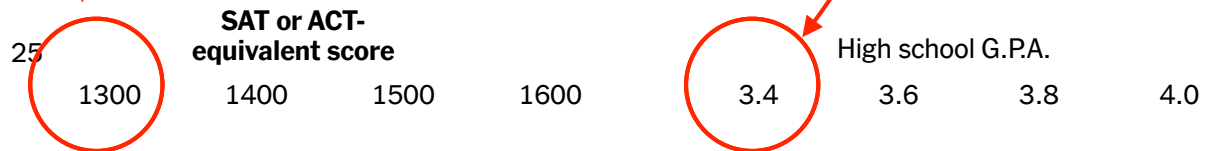
45%

40

35

why does that range of scores and GPA considered keep changing? does change the range help the numbers support their point?

30



Note: Data is for students who entered college from 2010 to 2015. • Source: Opportunity Insights and Chetty, Deming and Friedman (2023) • By Ashley Wu

Last week, three scholars — Bruce Sacerdote and Michele Tine of Dartmouth, along with Friedman — released additional research about some unnamed Ivy Plus colleges. It showed only a modest relationship between high school grades and college grades, partly because so many high school students now receive A's. The

this makes it sounds like different scholars but its the same Opportunity Insights group.

relationship between test scores and college grades, by contrast, was strong.

Students who did not submit a test score tended to struggle as much as those who had lower scores:

Test scores are strong predictors of college performance

3.8 college G.P.A.

Test scores are more predictive than high school grades of college grades.

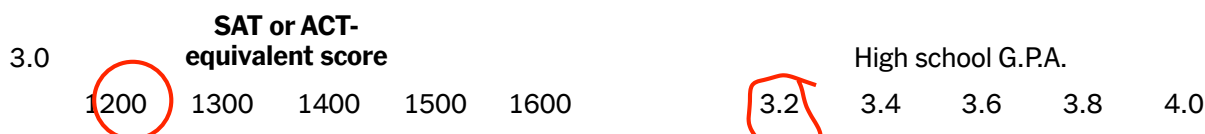
3.6

at the 12 colleges in the study, we

3.4

Missing test scores

3.2



the sat range is from 400 - 1600 .. they just ignored the lower two-thirds of scores

Note: Data is for students who entered college from 2017 to 2022, excluding 2020. • Source: Opportunity Insights and Friedman, Sacerdote and Tine (2024) • By Ashley Wu

Some people have worried that SAT scores are merely a proxy for income or race, Sacerdote noted, but the data should alleviate this concern. **Within every racial group, students with higher scores do better in college.** The same is true among poor students and among richer students:

Test scores and college grades are strongly related, regardless of

(mistated) STRAWMAN ... no one is worried. this is a fact that scores correlate almost perfectly to income and family education status. It correlates to that almost better than to anything else.

this line of reasoning is common among test lovers. Ignoring who is hurt by asking who is helped. This ignores the discrepant score reports from College Board and ACT. Those show that students who have GPAs that are higher than test scores indicate are women, under rep minorities and poor students. Rich white males have scores that are higher than their GPAs at a much higher rate. In short, if you look at who is helped and who is hurt by tests, tests help rich white males more than anyone else.

students' high school type

Students from **advantaged** and **disadvantaged** high schools

3.8 college G.P.A.

Advantaged

Disadvantaged

3.6

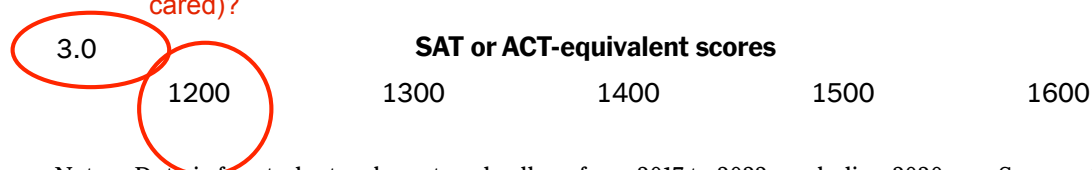
According to this study disadvantaged high schools include the \$60k a year Poly Prep in brooklyn and many others like it.

3.4

Missing test scores

3.2

why would any conversation of success start with a 3.0 GPA? everyone 3.0 and above is successful as a student. Also this is for first year.. what percent of 3.0s increase after year 1 (if we cared)?



Notes: Data is for students who entered college from 2017 to 2022, excluding 2020. • Source: Opportunity Insights and Friedman, Sacerdote and Tine (2024) • By Ashley Wu

Amid all the subjectivity in the admissions process, the SAT and ACT — even with their flaws — **offer meaningful information** about an applicant’s readiness to do high-level academic work. The tests create **a fixed benchmark** that can be more reliable than high school grades, teacher recommendations or extracurricular activities. “The SAT just tells you a lot about how well prepared students are for college,” Sacerdote said.

A fixed benchmark? the test that has changed 3 times 9 years is a fixed benchmark? The class of '16 took a 4 hour paper test with vocab. the class of '20 took a 3.5 hour test with no vocab. Class of '25 will take a 2.5 hour digital test.

When I have asked university administrators whether they were aware of the research showing the value of test scores, they have generally said they were. But several told me, not for quotation, that **they feared the political reaction** on their campuses and in the media if they reinstated tests. “It’s not politically correct,” **Charles Deacon**, the longtime admissions dean at Georgetown University, which does require test scores, has told the journalist Jeffrey Selingo.

Asking Charlie Deacon about the SAT is like asking Cookie Monster about cookies.

Georgetown is the only college that doesn't accept superscoring (forcing students to send all scores). They were also the darn near the last college to require SAT Subject tests

In 2020, the University of California system went further than most colleges and announced — **despite its own data** showing the predictive value of tests — that it would no longer accept test scores even from applicants who wanted to submit them. In recent months, I made multiple requests to discuss the policy with university officials. They replied with an emailed statement saying that “U.C. remains committed to maintaining a fair admissions process that reviews every applicant in a comprehensive manner and endeavors to combat systemic inequities.” University spokespeople declined to discuss the policy by telephone or to schedule an interview with an administrator.

Again more cherry picking. Ignores Saul Geiser's critique of the report, ignores other reports that question some of the findings.

It remains unclear whether other colleges will revisit their test-optional policies given the new data. As is, many teenagers say they are confused. They are uncertain about whether to take the tests and what scores are high enough to submit.

This data is only new if your only perspective is highly rejective colleges and if you choose to ignore 20 years of studies

The View From M.I.T.

MIT is quoted saying their decision was a very MIT decision

M.I.T. has become a case study in how to require standardized tests while prioritizing diversity, according to professors elsewhere who wish their own schools would follow its lead. During the pandemic, M.I.T. suspended its test requirement for two years. But after officials there studied the previous 15 years of admissions records, they found that students who had been accepted despite lower test scores were more likely to struggle or **drop out.**

MIT has a 96% 8 year grad rate. of the 2239 students who started there 2% dropped out. 2% transferred. The claim here is that the 44 kids who dropped out it was because of test scores and not money? death in family? mental health issues?

Schmill, the admissions dean, emphasizes that the scores are not the main factor that the college now uses. Still, he and his colleagues find the scores useful in identifying promising applicants who come from less advantaged high schools and have scores high enough to suggest they would succeed at M.I.T.

Without test scores, Schmill explained, admissions officers were left with two unappealing options. They would have to guess which students were likely to do well at M.I.T. — and almost certainly guess wrong sometimes, rejecting qualified applicants while admitting weaker ones. Or M.I.T. would **need** to reject more

need is doing a lot of heavy lifting here. This is a choice not a need. They can choose to admit students who might get a 3.2 gpa. they dont want to. They think getting a 3.5 instead of a 3.8 is failure, but they also want to bemoan grade inflation?

students from less advantaged high schools and admit more from the private schools and advantaged public schools that have a strong record of producing well-qualified students.

wow. so test scores caused diversity? apparently tests are the panacea for everything. why did they lack that diversity before the pandemic?

“Once we brought the **test requirement back, we admitted the most diverse class** that we ever had in our history,” Schmill told me. “Having test scores was helpful.” In M.I.T.’s current first-year class, 15 percent of students are Black, 16 percent are Hispanic, 38 percent are white, and 40 percent are Asian American. About 20 percent receive Pell Grants, the federal program for lower-income students. That share is higher than at many other elite schools.

here is a whole thread on the BS of The SAT saved my life narrative: <https://twitter.com/akilbello/status/1476005558109061120>

“When you don’t have test scores, the students who suffer most are those with high grades at relatively unknown high schools, the kind that rarely send kids to the Ivy League,” Deming, a Harvard economist, said. **“The SAT is their lifeline.”**

This is such propaganda. yes every once in a while a test score gets a scholarship for a well qualified student but to call that rare occurrence life saving is dramatic and hyperbolic.

Other colleges that still require the ACT or SAT tend to be somewhat removed from the **intensely liberal culture of most elite campuses**. Applicants to the United States Military Academy, at West Point, must take one of the tests. So must applicants to top public universities in Florida, Georgia and Tennessee. Gallaudet, the university in Washington, D.C., for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, also requires a test score.

A Question of Values

strongest according to whom? what Leonheart really means is that he values says that colleges must practice some for of visible exclusion and sorting in order to meet his values. someone must be called best and worse

The **strongest** case against the tests comes from educational reformers who want to rethink elite higher education in fundamental ways. To them, the country’s top colleges should not be trying to identify the very best high school students; instead, these colleges should use their resources to educate a diverse mix of good students and, in the process, lift social mobility.

Comeaux — a professor of higher education at the University of California, Riverside, and co-chair of the state’s review of standardized tests — favors this approach. He agrees that the SAT and ACT predict later success. But he prefers a stripped-down admissions system in which colleges set minimum requirements,

based largely on high school grades, and then admit students by lottery. "Having a lottery," Comeaux said, "would make us radically rethink what it means to gain access and also to learn, rather than accepting the status quo."

That's not so different from what many colleges already do. The average acceptance rate nationwide is close to 70 percent. Even many selective colleges admit more than 25 percent of applicants, and high school grades can be sufficient for that purpose. "Test scores become relatively more important as the academic level of students increases," Friedman, the Brown economist, said.

one of the studies he cites looked at 12 schools the other 33 schools. dozens only functions to make the debate sound more relevant than it is.

The SAT debate really comes down to **dozens** of elite colleges, like Harvard, M.I.T., Williams, Carleton, U.C.L.A. and the University of Michigan. The people who run these institutions agree that social mobility should be core to their mission, which is why they give applicants credit for having overcome adversity. But the colleges have another mission, as well: **excellence**.

The reports on which he relies so heavily do not define excellence in this way. They define as almost the reverse.

They want to identify and educate the students **most likely to excel**. These students, in turn, **can produce cutting-edge scientific research** that will cure diseases and accelerate the world's transition to clean energy. The students can **found nonprofit groups** and companies that benefit all of society.

The Opp Insights report does not discuss research only working in jobs that hire heavily from Ivy and pay a lot.

Administrators at elite colleges have justified their decision to stop requiring test scores by claiming that the tests do not help them identify such promising students — a claim that is inconsistent with the evidence. The evidence instead suggests that standardized tests can contribute to both excellence and diversity so long as they are used as only one factor in admissions.

So David believes administrators when they tell us to use tests but don't provide data, but not when they say are not helpful.

As it happens, most Americans support using standardized test scores in precisely this way. The Pew Research Center has asked Americans whether colleges should consider standardized tests when making admissions decisions. A large majority of people, across racial groups, support doing so:

Public opinion on standardized test scores in college admissions

U.S. adults who say test scores should be a factor in college admissions decisions

I guess he didn't read the story in the <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/college-admissions-educational-consultants-command-education.html> they main character in the story started a non profit and then abandoned it as soon as he got into Yale. Also the founder for Frank, Theranos, and Enron's CEO are ivy grads... and probably more representative.

	Major factor	Minor factor	Not a factor
All	39%	46%	14%
BY RACE/ETHNICITY			
White	40	47	12
Black	34	45	21
Hispanic	40	41	17
Asian	42	42	15

Note: People who did not answer are not shown. • Source: Pew Research Center survey in March 2022 • By Ashley Wu

In today's politically polarized country, however, the notion that standardized tests are **worthless or counterproductive** has become a tenet of liberalism. It has also become an example of how polarization can cause Americans to adopt positions that are not based on empirical evidence. *You'd be hard pressed to find education liberals who say they are "worthless" the general consensus is more signal than noise and insufficient additive value to be worth the cost*

Conservatives do it on many issues, including the dangers of climate change, the effectiveness of Covid vaccines and the safety of abortion pills. But liberals sometimes try to wish away inconvenient facts, too. In recent years, Americans on the left have been reluctant to acknowledge that extended Covid school closures were a mistake, that policing can reduce crime and that drug legalization can damage public health.

There is a common thread to these examples. Intuitively, the progressive position sounds as if it should reduce inequities. But data has suggested that some of these policies may do the opposite, harming vulnerable people.

In the case of standardized tests, those people are the lower-income, Black and Hispanic students who would have done well on the ACT or SAT but **who never took the test because they didn't have to**. **Many colleges have effectively tried to protect these students from standardized tests**. In the process, the colleges denied some of them an opportunity to change their lives — and change society — for the better. *This is another strawman argument, that times people like McWhorter love to say. No serious education advocate has every claimed that they wanted to PROTECT students from tests, they want to minimize using something that is not predictive, time consuming, over valued, and advantages the wealthy.*

David Leonhardt runs The Morning, The Times's flagship daily newsletter. Since joining The Times in 1999, he has been an economics columnist, opinion columnist, head of the Washington bureau and founding editor of the Upshot section, among other roles. More about David Leonhardt