

Cost of Success: The Need for Access for SAT Preparation

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Abstract

The SAT is essentially a national test whose scores determine what colleges a student may enter. Low scores on the SAT render a student barred from attending many colleges because of an entry threshold. In order to gain every possible advantage for the SAT, students must increasingly turn to methods of test preparation. This article explores the purpose and effectiveness of SAT preparation. Ultimately, studies show that SAT training is highly effective at increasing scores. One aspect of the SAT program explored in this research is the wealth and racial gaps in SAT scores. These gaps suggest that families of higher wealth have an advantage in preparing for the test through outside programs. The studies also suggest that families with educated parents tend to have students who perform better due to a knowledge inheritance, as educated parents tend to emphasize the importance of the SAT and encourage their children to prepare early. Educated parents might begin cultivating test taking skills in their children at an early age. In contrast, parents without an educational background might not realize the importance of the SAT or lack the monetary means to prepare their children through extracurricular educational activities. In summation, an SAT score advantage exists for students from wealthy and highly educated families, and this might perpetuate a cycle of poverty. The studies I've examined underscore not only direct training for the SAT outside of normal high school hours, but the importance of educational and extracurricular activities in increasing SAT scores.

The importance of the SAT has only grown in significance since it was established by the College Board in 1926. The test is continually being tweaked, and the most recent iteration of the SAT was introduced in 2016. This test is a three-hour long exam with five sections dealing with grammar, passage reading, problem solving, and mathematical concepts. Preparation for the SAT is a huge industry in the United States, earning revenues in the hundreds of millions of dollars for some companies.

Because of the high-stakes nature of the test, it is important for students to perform well. To do so, students must know the material well, but they also need knowledge of the test structure so they can use their knowledge more efficiently. With training boosting scores, students who have access to outside services have an advantage on the SAT.

Buchman, Condrón, and Rosocigno define the term “shadow education” which

refers to the use of educational activities outside the standard class time. They found that highly educated and financially well-off families had a significant advantage in access to shadow education, and this advantage translates into higher SAT scores (2011, 436). SAT preparation courses are a form of shadow education directly related to improving scores. These courses often combine subject matter with coaching by focusing on the most common material in the SAT and providing advice for the most efficient process of answering questions. Following this advice allows the students to take the test more efficiently.

Another form of shadow education is tutoring, which is time with an instructor outside class for training in academic subjects. "Tutoring is a form of supplementary education that does not compete directly with public schools. Rather, tutors have carved a niche market at the fringes of the public system, giving students extra assistance that is difficult to obtain in regular schools" (Aurini & Davies, 2004, 4). Tutoring can improve a student's knowledge of a subject, and is often used to strengthen academic weaknesses. A combination of tutoring over time with coaching as the test nears is often employed by parents who want their children to do well on the SAT. But this combination of services requires commitment on the part of the student and the parent, as well as time and money. Other forms of shadow education include the ability to travel and participate in extra-curricular activity and hobbies. All of these forms of shadow education require wealth, thus contributing to stratification by allowing wealthier and more educated families to have an advantage in competition for higher education.

As opposed to tutoring, coaching improves a student's knowledge of the test

taking process and focuses little on academic content with the exception of common themes. Since each question in the SAT allows for only a minute and twenty seconds of answer time, coaching the test and speed training helps improve scores. These questions often involve specific information about a passage, or require working through an equation with limited time. A student who is fully capable of getting the right answer in three or four minutes in a relaxed environment will find it difficult to succeed on the SAT. Acquisition of knowledge is linked to speed of recall, so coaching becomes necessary to alleviate nervous stalling and increase speed. Students also need to know what to do when they are short on time.

A survey conducted in 2011 of 130 institutions of higher learning found that more than a third of those agreed that a twenty-point increase in SAT scores significantly improves likelihood of admission (Buchman, 2011, 450). Books and computer software were found to produce statistically insignificant positive results. Buchman's study on shadow education found that, "compared with no preparation, taking a high school course produces a gain of about 26 points. Taking a private/commercial course boosts scores by about 37 points." (Buchman, 2011, 450). These findings demonstrate a wealth gap in SAT readiness because the money required for shadow education produces, even in the short term, results that lead to an advantage in university selection process. This study can not take into account the educational advantages accrued over a lifetime with the benefit of more access to information and experiences.

SAT preparation services often coach speed of both recall and reading. Finding relevant information in passages

quickly or solving math problems with shortcuts is often emphasized. Test taking methods needed to handle the technical aspects of the test are no less important a determinant of test score than the academics. A good example of coaching's purpose is summed in the chapter, "Introduction to the SAT," found in *The Book of Knowledge* when it promises to run students through the content they need, show them where certain answers are traps, warn them of common mistakes, and optimize test speed via shortcuts to finding correct answers (A-List Services, 2017, 5).

One concrete aspect of wealth advantage are the fees involved for taking the SAT. Taking the standard test costs about fifty dollars while taking the test with the essay, which is recommended because many colleges require it, costs about sixty-five dollars. Not only are there fees for the SAT, there are a multitude of extra pay services as well. Score reports to send to college are free for the first four, but cost twelve dollars each to send additional reports. For thirty-one dollars, the College Board will rush scores to chosen colleges, a time advantage for those with the resources to pay. Getting scores by phone costs fifteen dollars, so it is best to utilize the internet access to get scores as soon as possible. Score verification costs fifty-five dollars per section. There is a refund for the essay section if an error is found, but that is contingent on an error being found (College Board, 2019). Fee waivers and reductions are available to those in aid programs, but are not available to low income families or those facing other forms of financial difficulty such as crippling debt.

Indeed, the data in Buchman's article suggests that those from families making between \$15,000 to \$50,000 are three

percent less likely to utilize a private tutor than a family earning less than \$15,000. Surprisingly, middle income students were five percent more likely to not prepare at all for the test than the lowest income section and were one or two percent likely to take a private course for SAT preparation. Those students whose families make fifty thousand or more were about six percent more likely to use a private tutor as their highest form of preparation and ten percent more likely to take private courses (Buchman, 2011, 447).

The shadow education advantage of wealthier families demonstrates the need for more resources devoted to test preparation for lower income families. Resources need to be available so that any student seeking an advantage through practice, coaching, tutoring, and training is not barred due to costs. Programs that provide students with education and recreational experiences outside of school are an investment that contributes to equality via raising up those whose only struggle is due to lack of resources.

References

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Recommended Citation

Leighty, J. (2019). Cost of success: the need for access for sat preparation. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>.