A Surprisingly Simple Way to Help Level the Playing Field of College Admissions

White, Asian-American and affluent students commonly take the SAT more than once, but disadvantaged students are less likely to, and it’s holding them back.

By Sahil Chinoy

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New research contains a message for high school students, especially low-income ones, who want to go to college: Take the SAT early and often.

It’s already clear from earlier studies that lack of information is a big reason many less affluent students don’t make it to college. They get less help navigating the complex process of applying. A new study finds another specific instance of this: Underrepresented students are less likely to take college admission tests more than once.

Encouraging them to retake tests — as many of their high-income, white and Asian-American peers do — could close a substantial portion of the income and racial gap in enrollment at four-year colleges. That’s the conclusion of a working paper released on Monday by Joshua S. Goodman, Oded Gurantz and Jonathan Smith.
The three economists studied over 10 million students who took the SAT reasoning test, one of two standard college admissions exams (along with the ACT), and analyzed the effect that retaking the exam had on the students’ subsequent scores and college prospects.

They found that, on average, retaking it improved SAT scores by nearly 90 points out of 2,400 — more for low scorers. Students who retook the test were likelier to enroll in a four-year (vs. two-year) college, probably because improved scores made them stronger applicants. Four-year colleges often have higher graduation rates, so retaking the SAT improves not only the chance of getting into college but also of getting a degree.

Mr. Goodman is an associate professor at Harvard. Mr. Gurantz, an assistant professor at Missouri, and Mr. Smith, an assistant professor at Georgia State, also consult for the College Board, which administers the SAT. Although the study examined SAT scores, the results would probably be similar for the ACT standardized test, the researchers said.

More than half of SAT-takers sit for the exam more than once; high-income students and those who identify as white or Asian are more likely to retake tests. For example, students with a family income over $100,000 are 21 percentage points more likely to retake tests than students with family income below $50,000.

Not everyone might know it’s possible to take the SAT as many times as you want. Other research has shown that some students, especially low-income ones far from urban centers, are not well-informed about college admissions. They overestimate costs, miss important deadlines and don’t apply to selective colleges that they’re qualified to attend. Such information gaps partly explain why high-income students are six times more likely to graduate from college than students from poorer families.

You Draw It: How Family Income Predicts Children's College Chances  May 28, 2015

A crucial question is whether retaking the tests actually raises scores. It’s possible that the difference in outcome instead reflects differences among students. Retakers might be more motivated, or know that their first attempt did not accurately reflect their abilities. So they might score higher than those who take the exam once, even if there were no advantage from familiarity or steadier nerves.

To address this, the researchers exploited “left-digit bias,” the phenomenon that we pay more attention to the left-most digits in a number, which is why stores often have prices like $8.99 instead of $9. Students scoring just below a round-number threshold were more likely to retake the test.

Left-Digit Bias in SAT Retaking
The small gap between 1,880 and 1,900 is unlikely to reflect a meaningful difference in ability or preparedness — but it affects the likelihood of retaking the test. By using the difference between students’ initial scores and the nearest multiple of 100 to predict whether they retook the exam, the researchers were able to estimate the true effect of taking the test a second time.

Because low-income and racially underrepresented students are less likely to get high scores and less likely to enroll in a four-year college to begin with, the consequences for them are especially significant. According to the study, equalizing the retake rate by income would close up to 20 percent of the gap in four-year college enrollment between poor and affluent students who take the SAT. And equalizing the retake rates by race would close up to 10 percent of the gap between white students and those who are black, Hispanic or Native American.

Those figures, however, assume that the students newly prompted to retake a test would be just as motivated as the students in the study who missed their target and took the test again.

“There are students who would benefit from taking the SAT a second time who are not taking it,” said Sarah E. Turner, a professor of economics and education at the University of Virginia, cautioning that encouraging retakes would not be a “silver bullet.”

The College Board offers fee waivers to students who qualify for subsidized meals at school. A waiver, usually obtained through a school counselor, lets eligible students take the SAT twice and send their scores to colleges at no cost, saving at least $129.
To encourage retaking, the study’s authors recommend making clear to low-income students that fee waivers are available. But financial barriers aren't the whole story, because more than half of students who used a waiver didn't retake the exam. The researchers also suggest prompting students to take their first SAT earlier. More than 40 percent of minority SAT-takers first took the test in 12th grade, compared with around 20 percent of white and Asian-American students, according to the paper. The average student first took the test at the end of 11th grade.

Many states have started offering the SAT or ACT during school hours at no cost and requiring students to take it. Studies in several of those states show that doing so uncovers students capable of attending college who would not otherwise have taken the test. The new results could motivate states and districts to move the exam date earlier and offer opportunities to retake it during school hours.

Alternatively, the College Board could prohibit retaking tests entirely, or schools could accept only results from a student's first try. But that might merely prompt advantaged students to shift their energy toward preparing for one attempt, without addressing the disparities in information and resources throughout the application process.

Between unlimited retakes and no retakes at all, “it’s entirely unclear which creates the most inequality,” Mr. Smith said. But under the current system, he added, encouraging disadvantaged students to take the SAT more than once is a relatively inexpensive way to improve their chances of attending a four-year college.

“Relative to the world we live in today, encouraging disadvantaged low-income students and minorities to retake the SAT more often would help close the college enrollment gap,” Mr. Goodman said. “The really broad questions about whether either of those worlds is the best possible world, we’ll have to leave for another day.”