

Your Questions about the New Adversity Score on the SAT, Answered

By Dana Goldstein

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The College Board, the company that administers the SAT exam, unveiled a new tool for admissions officers this week that measures the economic and social adversity that test takers have faced.

The adversity rating, which the College Board calls a measure of “disadvantage,” is meant to help schools diversify their student bodies without looking explicitly at race.

Here’s how the rating works, what information it includes and leaves out, and how education experts are reacting:

What factors are accounted for in the score?

The score includes 31 pieces of information meant to measure social disadvantage across two broad categories: the student’s neighborhood and the student’s school. None of the factors directly reflect an individual student; all of them are about the census tract in which the student and his or her classmates live. And none of the measures include race or ethnicity.

The goal is to find students who have transcended their environments by examining factors that are correlated, according to research, with lower academic achievement and lower lifetime earnings.

Some of the neighborhood factors are: median family income, percentage of households in poverty, percentage of single-parent households, percentage of vacant housing units, percentage of adults without a high school degree, percentage of adults without a college degree, percentage of adults with agriculture jobs and the unemployment and crime rates.

The school social measures look at a similar list of factors across all the census tracts of the students in the applicant’s school.

The rating system potentially benefits gentrifiers on neighborhood factors, but its two-pronged approach balances that to some degree by also looking at a student’s school. Many middle-class and affluent parents living in poor neighborhoods do not send their children to local schools alongside low-income peers.

How will these factors be weighted?

According to the College Board, each of the 31 factors are weighted equally to generate a score between 1 and 100. A score of 50 is an average level of disadvantage; higher scores mean a student has faced more adversity.

The environmental context measure does not affect the student's SAT score; it will be presented to admissions officials as part of a bigger package of data about the student. It is up to the college how to use the adversity measure or whether to use it at all.

How do education experts feel about the new tool?

Several scholars said that while the score provides important information, it should also include information on the individual student, and not just the student's neighborhood and school.

"If you're a really well-educated, higher-income family living in a poor neighborhood, this measure is going to overstate the disadvantage you face," said Sean Reardon, a professor of education at Stanford University.

But, he added, "The question is not whether it's perfect, but whether it's better than the alternative of what colleges have had access to, to date. It sounds like this will be better than nothing."

Financial aid documents already allow admissions officers to access information about many students' individual characteristics, including family income and assets.

How does race fit in?

Perhaps most notably, the new College Board tool, known as the Environmental Context Dashboard, contains no information on the student's race or ethnicity, or on the racial makeup of the student's neighborhood or school.

Some admissions officers "work in states that prohibit the use of race as a factor in admissions," said Connie Betterton, a vice president at the College Board. "We wanted to make this tool that could be used by all of our members."

Left unsaid is that many college officials are anticipating a potential Supreme Court ruling that could roll back the consideration of race in admissions.

Sheryll Cashin, a law professor at Georgetown and expert on educational and neighborhood inequality, said that by ignoring race entirely, the tool misses a crucial element of academic disadvantage — one that operates independently of economic, family and crime factors.

"What society tends to do is we tend to overinvest the whiter the neighborhood is and disinvest the blacker the neighborhood is," she said. "Not having that information is a true oversight if you really are interested in understanding adversity."

What research is this new tool based on?

A study on a pilot version of the dashboard, conducted by the College Board and researchers from the University of Michigan and Harvard, found that it resulted in more offers of admission to low-income applicants.

Jessica Howell, vice president of research at the College Board, said her team had drawn from a broad array of social science in developing the tool, including research by the Harvard economist Raj Chetty on the impact of neighborhood on lifetime earnings and academic achievement.

Among the scholars who consulted for the College Board was Richard D. Kahlenberg, a fellow at the Century Foundation and a proponent of class-based affirmative action. He said he would like to see the College Board tool evolve to also include information on a student's individual family. Still, he called the measure "an enormous step forward."