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Raymond J. Green
Texas A & M University - Commerce, Raymond_Green@tamu-commerce.edu

Sandy Kimbrough
Texas A & M University - Commerce

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Honors Admissions Criteria: How Important Are Standardized Tests?

RAYMOND J. GREEN AND SANDY KIMBROUGH
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-COMMERCE

In 2007 I had the rare pleasure of overseeing the transformation of our 45-year-old honors program into an honors college. The entrance requirements for our honors program had been designed to maximize the number of participants and largely boiled down to whether the student was interested in pursuing honors. However, admission to the Honors College included a scholarship and thus required more discernment in admission standards. Thus, I began to review the entrance requirements for ten honors colleges in Texas and its surrounding states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Not surprisingly, most other universities focused on high school grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores. The general practice among the schools was admission to the honors college for students in the top 10% of their high school graduating class, a 27 or higher composite score on the ACT, and 1200 or higher on the math and reading portions of the SAT. As a result we used those numbers as rough benchmarks for what we wanted our "typical" Honors College student to look like. In addition to these numbers, we added an interview to the selection process.

One of the benefits of starting a new program is that research questions are also policy questions upon which action can be taken. Investigating the success and failure of our first cohort had the potential to help us shape our entrance criteria in order to enhance the likelihood of success for future students. Whereas an established program might be resistant to change, a new program can be more flexible. Thus, the ability to predict the performance of first-year students was an exciting area to study. However, as Khe (2007) pointed out, the issue of what criteria best predict success is a large and complex question that has led to no shortage of debate. The literature surrounding the question of entrance criteria contains a wide range of opinion. Wolfe and Johnson (1995) found that 19% of the variance in freshman GPA could be accounted for by high school GPA. Anastasi (1988) summarized 2000 studies investigating the link between SAT scores and GPA and concluded that the scores predicted 18% of the variance in freshman GPA. A more recent

meta-analysis including research involving over one million students indicated that the SAT is a valid predictor of first-year GPA (Hezlett et al., 2001). On the other hand, Robert Sternberg has long been an opponent of an overreliance on standardized testing. His claim is that "tests only work for some of the people, some of the time" (Sternberg, 1982; p 157).

Complicating the question is the fact that there are numerous ways to define success in an honors college; these include retention rates, graduation rates, *cum laude* status at graduation, quality of theses, involvement in honors activities, and subjective ratings by its participants. However, for the purpose of this investigation we focused on the first-year GPA of our initial cohort. Our goal was to investigate the relationship between our admissions criteria and first-year academic success. Our premise was that we needed to insure that students could get through the first year before those other outcome variables became relevant. The first-year cohort had the following characteristics: an average combined math/reading score of 1220 on the SAT, an average composite score of 28 on the ACT, and an average class rank in the top 12%. The fall GPA for our 55 students was a 3.17, with a range from 0.0 to 4.0 (*sd*=.88). Seven students left the program before the spring semester began. The students who left had similar standardized scores to those who remained; both groups averaged a 28 on the ACT while the group that left had a slightly higher SAT than those who remained in the program (1241 versus 1217). Although the numbers are too small to run a meaningful analysis, it does appear that the two groups differed significantly in their average class rank. The students who remained in the program had an average class rank in the top 11% and those who left the program had an average rank in the top 21%. The spring GPA of the remaining students was 3.35, with a range of 1.0–4.0 (*sd*=.63). This GPA compares very favorably with the 2.15 GPA for non-Honors College freshmen at our university.

Correlations were calculated among GPA, standardized test scores, and high school class rank percentile. Looking first at the standardized test scores, the correlation of the fall GPA with the SAT was .07 while the correlation with the ACT was -.08. The relationships between the two variables became slightly stronger when looking at spring GPA. Here the correlations were .09 for the SAT and -.28 for the ACT. Although these correlations are slightly stronger, none of the correlations is statistically significant. The correlations between high school class rank percentile and GPA were much stronger than the correlations with standardized test scores. In the fall the correlation was .59 and in the spring it was .58; both were significant at the $p<.01$ level.

These results are supported by subsequent stepwise multiple linear regressions on the fall and spring GPA. The two outputs were extremely similar, so for the sake of brevity only the output for the spring data is included.

The regressors were class rank, ACT, and SAT scores. The regression was a good fit (R^2_{adj}=89%), and the overall relationship was significant ($F_{1,3}$ = 24.33, p<.04). Only the effect of class rank was significant; as class rank improved (i.e., closer to 1), GPA increased.

The numbers from the first year of our Honors College indicate that high school class rank percentile is a good predictor of academic success for our first-year students. Individuals with lower class ranks, regardless of their standardized scores, were less likely to remain in the program. Overall, there was a significant correlation between class rank and college GPA in the freshman year. Further, standardized tests seem to be weak to poor predictors of success; note that the correlation between ACT scores and GPA is negative. However, we also believe that it would be premature to throw out standardized tests as part of the admission process. Our sample size in this study is relatively small and may be unique. Thus, we would like to continue to investigate this relationship with successive cohorts. Further, the freshman year, and particularly the first semester, is a unique time in a college student's life. The pattern of data reflected here may not carry over to the sophomore through senior years. Although the literature suggests otherwise, it may be that the standardized scores will be good predictors of GPA for the remaining three years of college or will accurately predict other criteria of success (e.g., graduation rates).

The finding that high school class rank was a good predictor of first year GPA should not be too surprising. It is an axiom in psychology that the best predictor of a future behavior is past behavior (Connor & Armitage, 1998). Success in college requires a combination of intelligence, motivation, work ethic, and study skills; this is the same set of skills that is required to do well in high school. Even with the debate surrounding standardized tests and what they measure, few would argue that a timed test measures work ethic.

With that said, these numbers were compelling enough for us to adjust our admissions formula for the second-year cohort. Although we still use standardized tests while considering applicants, success in high school now receives a greater weight in our decision making. If future data continue to indicate that standardized scores do not predict success for our students, we will be faced with the question of whether to drop the scores from our admissions criteria. A number of universities and colleges have moved in this direction in the last few years. However, there is frequently resistance to such a move, ranging from questions about the comparability of different high school systems to the preference of upper-level administrators to sell programs by talking about the high standardized scores of the students within such programs.

Ultimately our goal is to increase the likelihood of success of our Honors College students. Although many steps can be taken once the student is admitted to the university, entrance criteria may assist us in improving the students' odds of surviving the first year of college. Thus, I echo Khe's (2007) statement that further analyses of admissions standards will help improve quality in all academic areas.

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The authors may be contacted at

Raymond_Green@tamu-commerce.edu.