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Fall 2007

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SRIRAM KHÉ

The Irrelevance of SAT in Honors?

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WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY

The Honors Program at Western Oregon University is like most other programs when it comes to admission: we have established minimum requirements for SAT/ACT scores and high school GPAs. Over the last couple of years that I have been directing the program, I have consistently and incrementally raised these requirements. At the same time, I have been increasingly intrigued by one question: do these minimum requirements really matter? If high school GPAs and SAT scores are used as measures of students when they enter the university and the Honors Program, then how do these students measure up to comparable metrics when they graduate?

At the outset, I concede that this is a huge research question and a highly controversial one too. An analysis would require discussion of the problems with the SAT such as those described by Nicholas Lemann; it would address the classist nature of American society and higher education as elucidated by, for instance, Walter B. Michaels; and it would involve a host of issues such as grade inflation in high schools. The potential for heated arguments is, in academia, no excuse for staying away from research topics; in fact, it is all the more reason to ask such questions. Thus, despite the many complexities of the topic that lie beyond the scope of this essay, I wish to examine the SAT- and GPA-related data for the five years that I have been at my current institution, not all of them as Director of the Honors Program. My hope is that this five-year analysis will serve as a pilot study from which I can then frame a more rigorous research agenda.

All along, I had assumed that high SAT scores and high school GPAs would four years later result in high academic success. However, a preliminary investigation of this hypothesis, which is described in this pilot study of data from five cohorts of honors students at a regional public university, reveals that there is no such consistent pattern. This relatively counter-intuitive finding calls for not only additional and detailed data analysis but also rethinking of the admission requirements for honors.

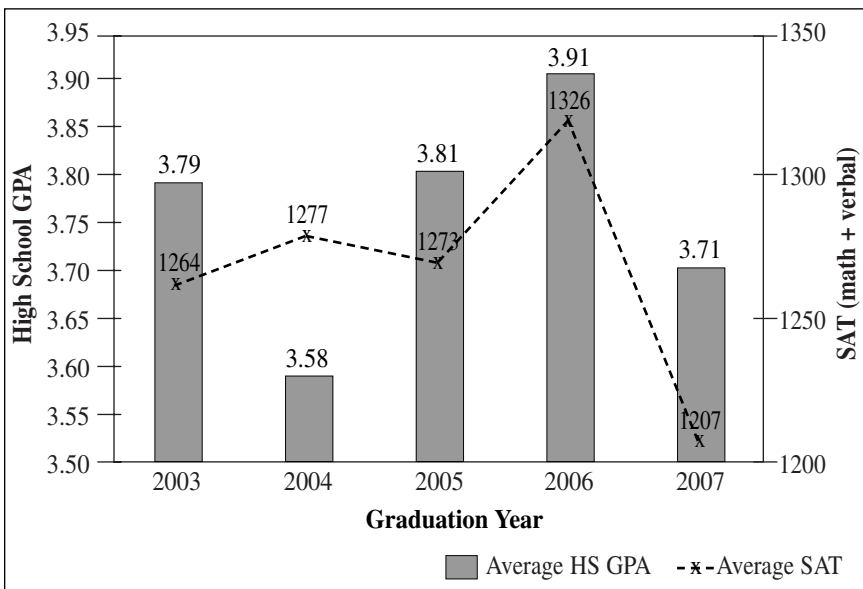
DISCUSSION

The Honors Program at Western Oregon University was initiated in 1984 and has grown in size over the years. In the early years of the program, seldom did a freshman class number in the double digits. However, in recent years we have admitted, on average, about twenty students in each freshman class.

In order to be considered for the Honors Program, students are required to have, at a minimum, an SAT score of 1180, an ACT score of 26, or high school GPA of 3.5. Figure 1 describes the average SAT and high school GPA of each honors graduating class. (ACT scores were converted to equivalent SAT scores.) Note that these are averages of students who graduated from the program and not of the entire class that was admitted during those years; our program typically retains about sixty percent of a freshman class all the way through to graduation. Over the five years, students who graduated from the Honors Program qualified for it as high school graduates with an average GPA of 3.76 or an average SAT score of 1270.

SAT scores result from a common, standardized test as opposed to high school GPAs that do not have common curricula and assessment mechanisms. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we do not have a common, standardized test when students exit the university. Because only a smaller subset of the graduating class goes on to graduate school, not all of them take the GRE, which could serve as a standardized test. Comparing GPAs across majors is a problem, too—it is, in a way, like comparing GPAs of students coming from

Figure 1: Profile of the Honors Graduates: When They were Freshmen

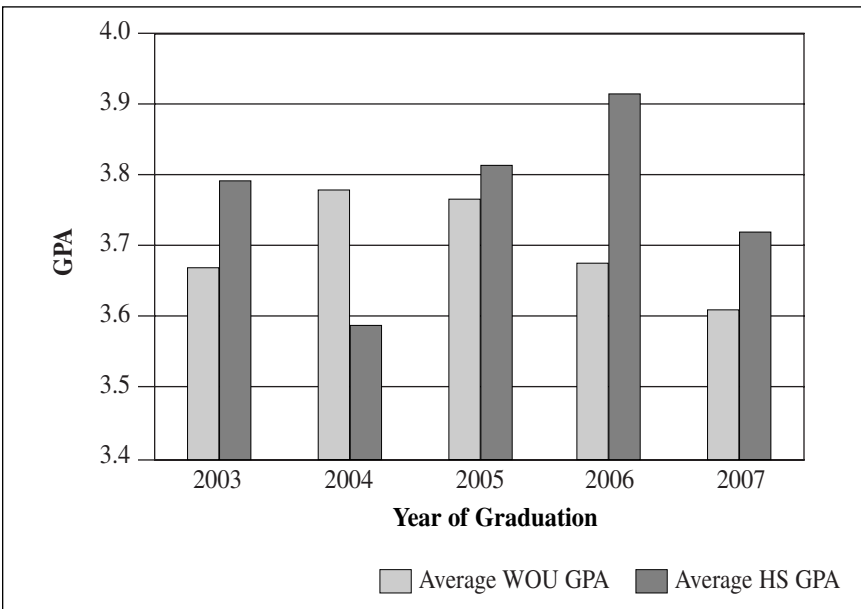


different “high schools” within the university, where the curricula and assessment for majors differ widely. Thus, it is quite possible for student X with a lower high school GPA than student Y to graduate with higher university GPA because of a different major. In fact, in most universities students whisper, and sometimes loudly talk, about majors and courses where earning the top grade is relatively easy.

Despite the complexities in comparing GPAs across the different majors, I have compared the average GPAs for the entire graduating cohorts in a manner similar to the way high school GPAs were averaged for this study. Figure 2 is a comparison of the average GPA at graduation and the respective high school GPA for each cohort. It is interesting that the average GPA at graduation for the cohort that graduated in 2004 is higher than the average high school GPA. For the other four cohorts, there is a significant decrease in the average GPA. The decrease in GPA from high school to college supports my intuitive understanding from observing students over the years: for most students, the college GPA will be lower than the high school GPA. Incidentally, if this were indeed the case across academia, we might want to discuss it during freshman orientation sessions in order to prevent the disappointment that most well prepared students feel when they earn the first B of their lives.

University GPA is also the measure that defines whether a student is “lauded” with *cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, and *summa cum laude* notations

Figure 2: University (WOU) GPAs of Honors Graduates and their Respective High School GPAs



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on the diploma. Generally, honors students are expected to graduate with such notations. However, as can be seen in Figure 3, not all honors graduates earned even the *cum laude* status.

As Figure 3 shows, the lowest percentage of honors students graduating with “laude” (total of the three “laude” classifications) honors was in 2006, which is interesting because it was also the same cohort that had the highest SAT and GPA coming in. The immediate follow-up is to relate the freshman profile in Figure 1 with the graduation honors of Figure 3, and this is captured in Figures 4 and 5. These two figures are similar in that neither the SAT scores nor the high school GPAs appear to correlate with graduation honors.

The conclusion that can be derived from this pilot study is a variation of what Wall Street investment firms always remind customers: past performance does not guarantee future success. For a cohort, high SAT scores or high school GPAs do not directly lead to high GPAs in college. Whether there might be individual-level variations that could establish any relationship needs to be explored.

Of course, the data analysis presented here is not statistically rigorous enough. In addition, a number of other issues need to be discussed, such as:

- comparing honors graduates with students who were admitted into the same cohort but withdrew from the program: is there any significant difference in their academic success, and how much of that difference can be attributed to the Honors Program?

Figure 3: Percentage Graduating with “Laude”

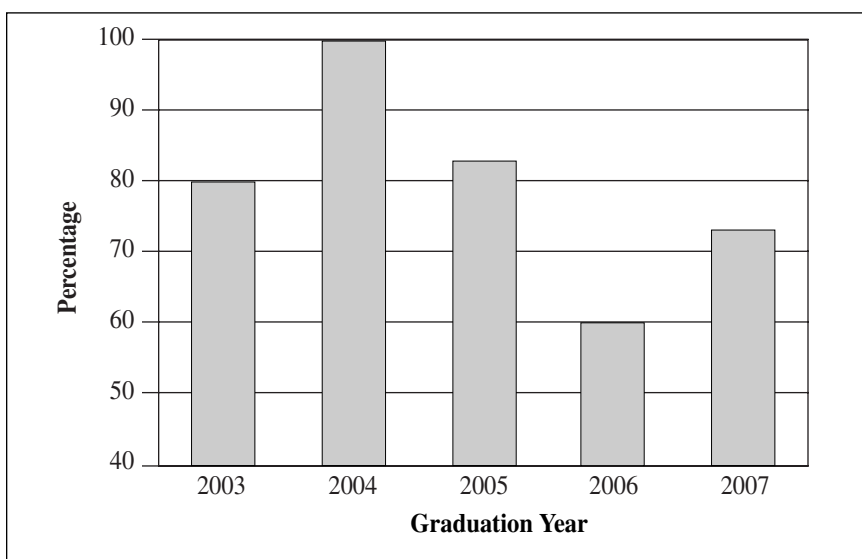


Figure 4: SAT and Graduation Honors

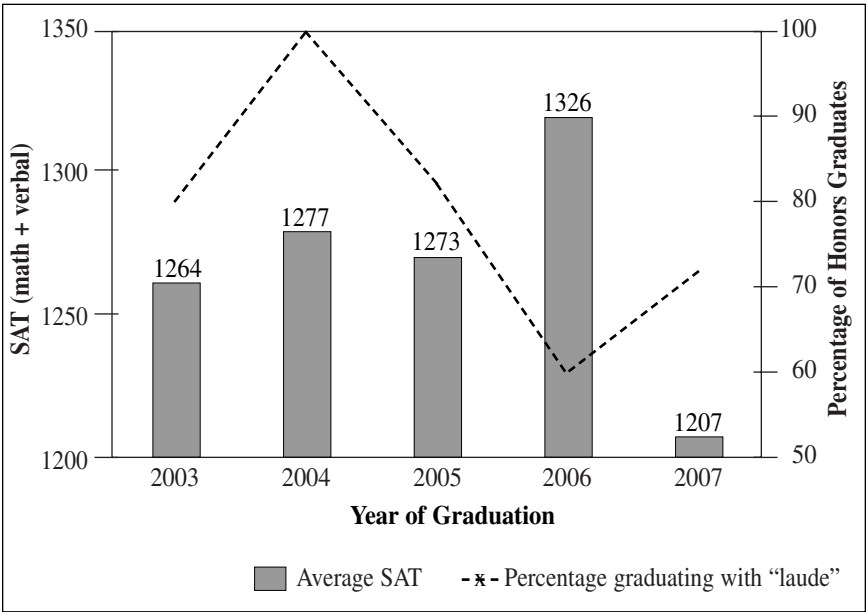
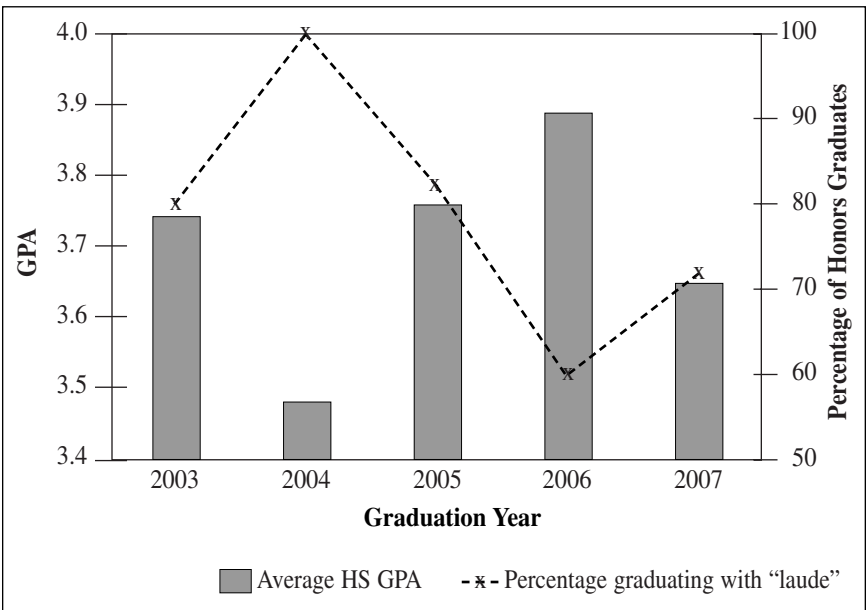


Figure 5: High School GPA and University Graduation Honors



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- comparing the GPAs of students in the common core of honors courses with those in non-Honors courses: in the “standardized” honors environment, how much can high school GPA and SAT score predict a student’s scholastic performance?

Above all, two important questions stand out:

1. If it is indeed the case that admissions criteria do not necessarily promote a certain academic performance desired by the institution, then what can be the rationale for continuation of the criteria? Should we follow the precedent set by a few colleges and universities that have decided not to require SAT scores from applicants?
2. How do the admissions criteria relate to the mission of the program?

The second question is even more complicated than the first because it can be quite difficult to establish criteria that relate admissions to the vision and mission of the program.

The vision and mission of our Honors Program are quite broad and do not easily lend themselves to quantifiable metrics that can then be adapted as guidelines for admission.

The vision of the Honors Program at Western Oregon University is to foster a way of life in which faculty and students understand that inquiry and learning happen everyday, and in a shared and continuous mode.

Towards this vision, the Honors Program considers its mission to:

- Develop a learning community committed to scholarly inquiry;
- Offer a rigorous disciplinary environment to prepare students for excellence in and out of the classroom; and
- Create and sustain an interdisciplinary curriculum that will encourage faculty and students in their intellectual pursuits.

It is not clear how raising the minimum high school GPA or SAT scores will ensure progress toward the vision of fostering a way of life where learning is an ongoing activity. In a recent research note from the College Board, which administers the SAT tests, Jennifer Kobrin notes that “many colleges use SAT scores in conjunction with HSGPA to predict students’ likelihood of success at their institutions. Many of these colleges calculate an academic index, which is usually based on institutional research about the performance of enrolled students.” Kobrin further comments that “the elements and weightings used to create the academic index, and how this index is actually used, reflect institutional priorities.” This pilot study indicates that there

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might be a need to revise the academic index used for admission to the Honors Program at Western Oregon University.

Of course, the vision and mission of honors programs and colleges at other universities will not be identical to those at the institution examined in this pilot study. But it is possible that an examination of the relationships among the entry requirements (SAT/ACT and GPA), the vision/mission of honors, and the outcomes might yield results that are comparable to those discussed in this pilot study. It is the author's firm belief that such analyses will help efforts to improve quality not only in honors but also in academe.

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