

Test Prep Courses May Not Affect Scores, Study Says

Test preparation companies, like Kaplan Inc., insist that the study's methods were unfair, skewing the results.

By VADIM ISAKOV
Staff Writer

A recent study has concluded that preparation courses for college admissions tests, including the SAT, might not be as effective as many people think.

The study was conducted by Derek Briggs, a doctoral student in education at the University of California-Berkeley.

Briggs said the purpose of his research was to determine whether SAT coaching was effective. "I was interested in the effect the commercial preparation programs have on the actual scores," he said. "I don't work for any testing or coaching company, and I do not have the intention to lie."

Briggs found that coaching improves scores by only about 20 points on the SAT, piling in comparison to the 150 to 200 point increase advertised by many test preparation companies.

In the math section of the SAT, coaching improved students' scores by 14 percent, and on the verbal section scores increased by 5 percent.

Similar results were found for the stu-

dents who took preparation courses for the ACT.

Briggs based his study on data taken from the National Education Longitudinal Survey, which began in 1998. The survey tracks a nationally representative sample of students from the eighth grade through high school and beyond.

Briggs said his research took into account not only students who attended preparation courses and took the test but also students who went to the classes but decided not to take the SAT.

"If test preparation companies or private tutors advertise only the average score gains of the students who make use of their services, the 'effect' of this preparation is misleading," Briggs stated in an article detailing his results.

But coaching company representatives and critics of standardized tests have attacked the study's methodology and criticized its results.

"The major flaw of the study is that it is too broad," said Cristina Perez, an advocate in the university testing reform division of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

Perez added that it would be beneficial to examine different levels of coaching. She also suggested the formation of an independent committee to further study the results of coaching programs on test scores.

Seppy Basili, vice president at Kaplan

Inc., a test preparation company, echoed Perez.

"The results do not surprise me because of the methodology (Briggs) used," he said. "The author did not make any distinctions in the kinds of preparation."

Basili explained that the results of preparation programs could vary depending on the amount of time students commit to preparing for the test.

He said students who spend 36 hours a week are more likely to show improvement than those who spend only 16 hours. "Those preparing for the SAT 36 hours a week improve their scores by 120 points," he said.

Basili also stressed the importance of standardized tests as a factor in college admissions.

"The SAT is only one of many factors that influence on the decision to accept a student to a university, and I don't think the role of the test in the admission process is too much emphasized," he said. "The rapid growth of our company is the most obvious sign of the public recognition of our methods and results."

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By SALLY FRANCIS
Staff Writer

Community college officials are making it easier for black students to transfer across state lines to historically black colleges and universities by establishing an outline for transfer credits.

Although many states, including North Carolina, have transfer credit agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions, this proposal would create a course-to-course agreement that would have national implications, allowing students to transfer more easily to schools in other states.

The transfer credit agreements specify which community college course credits will transfer to four-year colleges, helping students complete their college educations without the delays often caused by transfer confusion.

Philip Day, chancellor of the City College of San Francisco and coordinator of the plan, said the program will help erase a racial gap between the percentage of black and white students who graduate from a four-year university.

Day added that the number of college graduates has increased overall since 1970, but the number of black student graduates has failed to keep pace.

He said the plan, which targets black students at community colleges who want to earn a baccalaureate degree from a four-year university, will help make up the racial difference in graduation rates.

Advocates of the plan said students who transfer into four-year institutions their junior years will not increase enrollment but will replace those who have withdrawn from college. The plan aims to enable more blacks to graduate with baccalaureate degrees.

No N.C. college is participating in this national initiative.

"Given that there are pressures on North Carolina and we are hard pressed to educate 50,000 North Carolina students, it is not to our advantage to solicit new students from out of state," said Gretchen Bataille, UNC-system vice president of academic affairs.

But Audrey Bailey, N.C. Community College System spokeswoman, said anything that allows community colleges to help their students succeed is positive.

"While our focus is on continuing education and work-force training, our focus on transfers is growing," Bailey said.

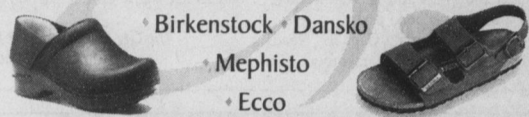
This initiative also hopes to link high schools, community colleges and four-year institutions together and create joint admissions agreements to motivate and guide students into the network.

Day has applied to the Ford Foundation, Mott Foundation and Met Life Foundation and said he hopes to tap into federal funding to gain monetary support.

"The problem with funding is getting the network established, but once it gets started, I think the institutions will make the commitment."

The State & National Editor can be reached at stntdesk@unc.edu.

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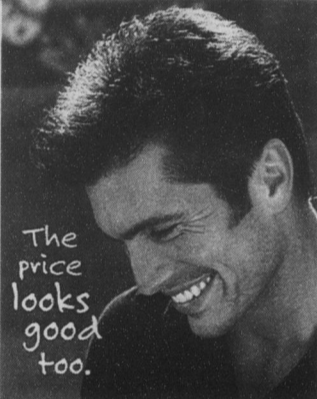
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