

THE CULT OF ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

We're afraid that black students who perform at that high a level aren't going to be concerned with nurturing an African-American presence at Berkeley.

—Undergraduate black student recruiter, spring 1998

The reader may have detected by now that I watch a lot of television. Another stray moment I remember was an episode of *The Facts of Life* where a black girl (not Kim Fields's Tootie, but a one-shot character) was depicted as being obsessed with Latin. Every now and then she would get up and passionately declaim some Latin phrase to emphasize a point.

It was another moment that struck me as so false that I still remember it almost twenty years later. Latin is harder than French or Spanish, and because it's dead, you don't learn it to express yourself or talk to anyone, but to read mostly formal things written by extremely dead people about a world quite different from ours. In other words, learning Latin is very much an intellectual exercise, which one engages in out of curiosity about a different time and place, and ideas of a universal nature. The little girl in this *Facts of Life* episode struck me as so otherworldly because I had met only one black person in my life who had ever taken Latin; twenty years later I have met one more.

There is a popular motivational book for black people called *Success Runs in Our Race*. In some ways, it does, but that thirty seconds on *The Facts of Life* is a reminder that one area where everyone would have to agree that Success Does Not Run in Our Race is school. Almost forty years after the Civil Rights Act, African-American students on the average are the weakest in the United States, at all ages, in all subjects, and regardless of class level.

The Cult of Victimology insures that this problem is viewed as the result of black suffering. Victimology plays its first hand in infusing almost all discussions of the issue with the tacit assumption that "black" means "poor," when in fact only a portion of black children are poor. From here, it becomes even more natural to attribute this lag in black scholarly per-

formance to inequities in school resources, teachers' racist biases, and chaotic home lives.

We are given this message so steadily and with so little variation that these assumptions can appear unassailable. However, in reality, school funding, racist bias, and quality of home life have the same relationship to why most black students do so badly in school as a weakened immune system has to whether or not one gets a cold. A virus causes the common cold. Various factors make people more susceptible to that virus, but if the virus is not present, not even all of those factors together will cause a cold. In this light, it is important, and insufficiently considered, that (1) the very factors considered to preordain black students to mediocrity do not thwart a great many minority groups from scholarly achievement, and (2) black students as often as not continue to perform below standard level even in plush, enlightened settings where all efforts are being made to help them.

As the common cold is caused by the rhinovirus, black students do so poorly in school decade after decade not because of racism, funding, class, parental education, etc., but because of a virus of Anti-intellectualism that infects the black community. This Anti-intellectual strain is inherited from whites having denied education to blacks for centuries, and has been concentrated by the Separatist trend, which in rejecting the "white" cannot help but cast school and books as suspicious and alien, not to be embraced by the authentically "black" person.

That this attitude is a problem in inner-city communities is not unknown, but it also permeates the whole of black culture, all the way up to the upper class. Certain components of cultural identity are felt more subconsciously than consciously, and often become apparent only upon travel elsewhere, such as the American commitment to the individual over the collective. In this vein, the African-American "cultural disconnect," as a black teacher friend of mine calls it, from the realm of books and learning operates covertly as much as overtly. Yet its pervasive power in either guise renders it, like Victimology and Separatism, a defining feature of cultural blackness today.

Nevertheless, the conviction that black children are barred from doing well in school, rather than culturally disinclined to, is fiercely held, because the reign of Victimology in the media as well as much black American thought makes it so difficult to believe that a race issue might break down in any other way. The problem is that this leads us to aim solutions to black school failure at black victimhood rather than at an unfortunate aspect of the culture. Because these solutions are misaimed, they either

stall or fail outright. The media emphasizes the onset, and later the defense, of such programs rather than their actual results. Yet it is a fact that after the institution of affirmative action, Head Start, campus minority counseling programs, and African-American Studies curricula, black school performance has risen a couple of notches and then plateaued.

This corresponds neatly to the minor extent to which black victimhood contributes to the problem; the rest of it is the culture—just as if all Americans' immune systems were normal, the common cold would be a bit less rampant but would still be around. But Victimology ensures that the failure of educational strategies to make more than a dent in the problem is traced to the eternity of racism, and that the plateau is either attributed to racist "backlash," or more often, simply ignored.

Because of this ideological holding pattern, in our America it is difficult not to feel that black students do poorly in school because the System does them in. The problem is in fact one of modern black American social psychology, and will yield only to solutions that squarely face this uncomfortable but decisive cultural trait.

Many of the things in this chapter were difficult to write about; some may feel, as many black women did during the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy, that I am unjustly airing the community's "dirty laundry." Yet I feel compelled to do so because there are times when airing dirty laundry is the only way to help. Only by taking a deep breath and devoting as much attention to these problems as we currently do to victimhood can we really start black students on the path to doing as well in school as anyone else.

It is important to realize when reading this chapter that it is not intended simply as a survey of unpleasant facts about black students' performance in school. My aim is to carefully build a specific argument—that the appearance that black students do poorly in school because the System does them in is an illusion that denies these students' basic humanity, and that the actual determining factor is a culture-internal legacy. The argument will consist of three parts.

The first part will attempt to undo a natural tendency to associate the black scholarly lag with poor people, and show that it cuts deeply across the culture as a whole. It must be understood that this is the *sole* goal of this upcoming section. I will address the Anti-intellectualism issue *itself* later; however, I cannot productively discuss this until it is clear that the black scholarly lag extends far beyond crumbling schools and violent neighborhoods. It is only this that I am arguing in the following section.

Black Student Performance: The Realities

SAT Scores

Black students' notoriously poor performance on Scholastic Achievement Tests is widely discussed, but few are aware of the breadth between black students and others, and even fewer that the gap has no correlation with income level. Even on the broad level, the numbers are disheartening: From 1981 to 1995, among students at a sample of twenty-eight selective universities, William G. Bowen and Derek Bok found that almost three-quarters of white students taking the SAT nationwide scored over 1200 out of 1600, but little more than one-quarter of black students did. This lag had the effect that, for example, the black students entering Berkeley with the best SAT scores in 1988 clustered in the lowest quarter of scores for all students at the school.

Through the "black is poor" lens that race issues are almost always filtered through in American discourse, statistics like this tend to be attributed to the fact that a greater proportion of blacks are poor than whites. But poverty is only a subsidiary factor in overall black SAT performance: for one, we must consider how few poor black students even take the SAT.

More to the point, in 1995, the mean SAT score for black students nationwide from families making \$50,000 or more was a mere 849 out of 1600. This must be compared with the mean score in 1995 for white students from families earning \$10,000 or less—i.e., really, no money—869. Money isn't everything, but even when we take parents' education into account the facts are the same. In 1995, the mean for black students whose parents had graduate, not just undergraduate, degrees was 844, even lower than the overall middle-class black mean. Statistics can deceive, but here even headcounts tell the story: In 1995, exactly 184 black students in the United States scored over 700 on the verbal portion of the SAT—not even enough to fill a passenger plane. In the math portion, 616 scored over 700. This was 2 percent and 6 percent of the black test takers, whereas five times and almost ten times, respectively, that proportion of white test-takers scored above 700. Many people addressing this issue point to the tricky relationship between income and class; I will discuss this issue later. Few of us, however, could honestly say that so many black people are "poor" financially or culturally that we would expect the entire group of black students in the United States doing better than 700 on the verbal portion of the SAT in an entire year to not even be able to fill one floor of a movie theater. Clearly poverty is not the issue here.

In their pro-affirmative action study *The Shape of the River*, William Bowen and Derek Bok note that most blacks' SAT scores at top schools are above the national white average and that blacks' average scores are better than the national average in 1951, which for everyone was lower. These points distract us from the crucial questions. Even if blacks' average SAT scores at top schools are higher than the national white average, why are they still the lowest in the schools overall? Even if blacks score better on the SAT than Archie Andrews and Henry Aldrich would have in 1951, the important issue is that today's black students' scores are still closer than anyone else's to the lower averages of yesteryear.

What Does a Black Kid Know About Skiing?

The Validity of the Tests

A standard answer to this question is that the tests do not measure black students' competence. It is casually assumed in most discussions of black school performance that whatever their SAT scores, black students go on to perform as well in college as other students. At one of many symposia on the demise of affirmative action at UC Berkeley, one particularly vocal (Latino) professor who advocates racial preferences in admissions bellowed to a round of applause "We hear these abstruse philosophical discussions—I got a higher SAT score than you, it's not 'fair'—let's know what SAT scores *mean!*" But there are figures on what they mean, and black students' lower SAT scores mean that they make lower grades in college.

First, SAT tests have been shown to correlate rather well with student performance: There is a tendency for SAT scores to correlate with college grade point average over four years for both whites and blacks. The correlation is nowhere near a lockstep, but neither is there all but no correlation, as is assumed by many. Here, for example, are William G. Bowen and Derek Bok who, although avid advocates of affirmative action, note after tabulating extensive data from twenty-eight selective universities and subjecting it to statistical analysis:

The simple association between SAT scores and grades is clear-cut. As one would have expected, class rank varies directly with SAT scores. Among both black and white students, those in the highest SAT interval had an appreciably higher average rank in class. . . . Moreover, the positive relationship between students' SAT scores and their rank in class . . . remains

after we control for gender, high school grades, socioeconomic status, school selectivity, and major, as well as for race.

Bowen and Bok also found that in the class of 1989, white students' average class rank was in the 53rd percentile, but black students' was in only the 23rd—the bottom quarter. Even after adjustment for factors like SATs, high-school grades, income, major, and others, black students rose only to about the 37th percentile—the lower second quarter. This is only one of many studies, all done by people concerned about black education, confirming the same discrepancy and disproving the commonly believed yet counterintuitive idea that college regularly sparks mediocre high-school performers into high scholarly achievement.

Indeed, studies have shown that SAT scores if anything *overpredict* black students' performance. In other words, the slippage between the score and future performance leans backwards—black students tend to make worse grades in college than white ones with the same SAT scores.

These solid demonstrations of the correlation between SAT scores and performance are a contradiction to the commonly heard assertion that "SATs don't mean anything anyway." Nor is it surprising. Few of us could name students with excellent SAT scores who found themselves at sea in university-level work, unless, of course, there was some extenuating psychological or social factor—the SAT is not, in itself, simply a meaningless hoop students are made to jump through that has no relation to college performance. If it were, then students who made *abysmal* SAT scores would often sail through college with top grades with little effort—yet how many students like this have any of us ever met? No matter what the societal reason, statistics show that there is a meaningful correlation between SAT scores and school performance.

Many will counter that there are plenty of students who do poorly or only okay on standardized tests but do well in school. Yet this does not signify that the SATs are meaningless, because again, the fact remains that students who do well on them almost *always* do well in school. It does mean that the SAT's predictability wanes somewhat in the middle range. So we have two facts. One is that not only statistics, but common sense show that it is reasonable to use the SAT as *one* indicator of how well a student is likely to do in school—for the simple reason that a high SAT score virtually guarantees strong performance in college.

The second is that, contrary to the going wisdom, the black-white SAT lag does signify that the proportion of black high-schoolers who will do well in school is lower than among other groups. It follows from

simple math. For white and Asian students, the proportion who will do well is composed of the ones who do well on SATs *plus* those who do not, but will excel in school anyway. Among black students, however, almost all of those who excel in school are from the second category rather than from a combination of both—which means that *the fraction of black students overall who will excel constitute a lesser fraction than that in other groups*. There might be a temptation to suppose that the fraction is not smaller, and that instead, the proportion of potentially excellent black students is the same as in other groups but that for some reason almost none of them do well on standardized tests. However, this idea forces one to claim that there is something inherent in black psychological makeup that prevents the expression of scholarly aptitude via tests, and our response to that must be, as one hears around nowadays, “Don’t go there! . . .”

Many these days do go there, of course, charging the SAT as inappropriate for minorities in “testing only one kind of intelligence,” what psychologist Howard Gardner calls “linguistic” and “logical-mathematical” intelligence. Gardner urges that teachers take into account spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential, musical, and other intelligences as well in communicating ideas. There is much value in this, but until by chance such teaching techniques by chance become established nationwide, “linguistic” and “logical-mathematical” intelligence will remain the most applicable to college material and how it is taught—reading critically, writing coherent papers, doing problem sets. In any case, almost every other group in the country manages to develop its “linguistic” and “logical-mathematical” intelligences and post regular averages or above on the SAT, so once again, our question is why black students are so uncomfortable taking a test that requires these kinds of intelligence. Separatism encourages some to essentialize blacks as having a “black intelligence” separate from wonky “logical-mathematicality,” but let’s be careful—that assertion is ironically reminiscent of some highly unsavory arguments. An America where black students are encouraged to nurture their artistic and spatial intelligence out of respect for their culture is an America where black people are our house entertainers and athletes. Last time I checked we were trying to get past that—isn’t this what *The Bell Curve* told blacks they should sit back and be satisfied with?

Meanwhile, one often hears that high-school grades ought to be the central focus in admissions rather than SATs, out of a belief that performance on standardized tests is unrelated to how students are doing in their actual schoolwork. Yet Lawrence Steinberg and his researchers

have found that in nine high schools in California and Wisconsin, including both predominantly white suburban schools as well as inner-city minority-dominated ones, black (and Latino) students made the lowest grades *regardless of family income*, with low-income Asians regularly outperforming middle-class black ones by a wide margin. Along the same lines, black students in the class admitted to Berkeley had an overall average of B+ while the whites students had straight-A averages.

Finally, the idea that SAT scores are culturally biased is an anachronism. The formulators of standardized tests are now dedicated almost to the point of obsession to eliminating all possible instances of cultural bias: How many of us have ever heard a black student complaining that the SAT she took assumed that students knew which wine goes with chicken? In any case, the rare examples of this type that used to elicit complaint only applied to the few poor black students who took the SAT (a classic example being references to skiing, a sport alien to an inner-city resident).

The performance gap continues in postgraduate school. There were 420 black students in the 27,000 who entered the top 18 law schools in 1991, but only 24 of them would have been admitted without racial preference policies. In New York in 1992, 63 percent of black takers of the bar exam failed while only 18 percent of the whites did. In 1988, 51.1 percent of blacks, but just 12.3 percent of whites, failed the first part of the National Board of Medical Examiners exam.

Thus all of the relevant evidence confirms that black students tend strongly to underperform in college, and most important, this is regardless of class or parental income. The figures are not simply drawn down by those contributed by poor students, then; we are faced with a culture-wide problem.

So far, of course, all I have given is numbers. But the numbers reflect concrete experience. At Berkeley, I have had occasion to teach large numbers of both black and other students. I spent a long time resisting acknowledging something that ultimately became too consistent and obvious to ignore, which was that black undergraduates at Berkeley tended to be among the worst students on campus, by any estimation. I tried my very best to chalk up each experience I had to local factors and personalities, but as one episode piled upon another, it got to the point where pretending that there was not a connection among them all would have required a suspension of disbelief beyond my capacity.

What sort of episodes do I mean?

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A black student intended to write a senior honors thesis under my supervision transforming episodes of her family history into fiction. At the beginning of the semester she submitted a three-page selection she had written for a previous class. As the semester passed, while my white senior honors students were engaged in research for their papers and consulting with me weekly or biweekly, this student came by only twice, regaling me with tales of her family history and promising written work "soon." I let her know that she would have to submit some kind of written material to me before the end of the semester so that I could grade her for her semester's "work." Even that was generous, of course, but I got nothing from her until just before Christmas break, and what she handed me was, quite simply, her family tree, drawn in pencil on a piece of notebook paper. I never saw her again.

That same year another black student writing an honors thesis under me managed to turn in a brief progress report before Christmas, but had obviously only looked at one book. She was diligent enough to report to my office every two weeks, but while by the second semester my white students were turning in chapters, she would always come empty-handed, with vague plans for traveling to do research. In the end she handed in an eleven-page thesis, in contrast to the thirty-page average of the others, and it was obviously a last-minute job based more on impressionistic reflection at her desk than on research.

A black student in one of my classes turned in a midterm so poor that it was difficult to believe that he had actually been physically present in the class, and after this disappeared for five weeks. Most students if they miss more than one class tend to call, leave a note, or send an e-mail explaining why, but sadly, black students often do not. He finally reappeared saying that he had been very sick and that he would get notes from the previous classes and attend regularly from then on, resisting my gentle suggestion that he drop the class. Nevertheless, his attendance thereafter was spotty, his final was predictably even worse than the midterm and made it clear that he had never gotten notes for the classes he missed, and he did not submit a final paper. I could not help but flunk him, but a few months later he came to my office hoping I would retract the F because it would interfere with his continuing to get the scholarship paying his tuition.

Another black student joined one of my linguistics classes. He had not

was not as important as it is in many other linguistics classes, and I assured him that I would help him through any rough spots he encountered. He was very good in class at giving dramatic speeches about discrimination when race issues happened to come up. But his homework showed that he was not taking in the ideas that I was teaching, and he did not improve even after I had more than once tutored him in my office. Shortly before the final, he vanished, and I did not hear from him again until months later, when he said he had simply frozen at the thought of taking the final.

Within reason, I try to give black students as much slack as possible. I used to do it out of a conventional vague sense that black students were "victims" on some level, but lately I have come to do it out of a sense that most of them are caught in a cultural holding pattern they cannot help. In any case, I made an arrangement with this student to take another of my classes, an African-American Studies course assuming no linguistics background, where he could use his grade to cancel out the F I had had to give him in the previous course.

Yet in that class, the story was the same: an almost strangely clueless first midterm, spotty attendance, and one day he even showed up at the end of a class eating a plate of food from the campus eatery, having come by just to pick up a handout (as well as another one for his friend, who had simply not shown up at all). He disappeared before the second midterm, later explaining that a relative had died. When he came back, because it would have been easy for him to get answers to the midterm by talking to the students who had already taken it (and also because I could not imagine it not being a disaster anyway), I made up a few extra credit research questions for him to take home and answer. I based the questions entirely upon class material and was extremely explicit about the kinds of answers I wanted.

What he gave me back had obviously involved effort, but what he had done was go to the library and look up new information, having learned so little from the class that he did not perceive the connection between the questions I gave him and the material I had been covering. Furthermore, the material he presented was largely undigested paraphrasing of his sources and had only diagonal connection to the questions I asked. Later on, this student came to my office hoping I could raise the C I gave him, as well as write him a recommendation for law school.

A student came to not one but both of my African-American Studies classes six weeks into the semester to enroll. She seemed strangely casual about joining classes when so much material had already been cov-

