Standardized tests are commonly used to assess general cognitive ability and to evaluate student retention of academic knowledge. Many students take standardized college entrance exams, such as the SAT, to gain admission to undergraduate colleges or universities. Furthermore, college entrance exams are used in the admission process for professional and graduate schools (e.g., Graduate Record Exam). Given this, it is important to understand students’ perceptions of the utility of such standardized tests, with respect to what these tests actually measure and their relevance to academic success for men and women.

According to the 2006 College Board National Report, men, on average, scored better than women on both the verbal and mathematics sections of the SAT. This follows a trend that has existed since 1972 despite repeated changes in the testing format (College Board SAT, 2006). Conversely, in the same student population, women reported higher overall high school grade point averages (GPA) than men. Moreover, researchers have found that despite lower average SAT scores, women maintain a higher GPA than men during their first year of college (Cullen, Hardison & Sackett, 2004). In fact, the SAT under predicts college performance for women (Leonard & Jiang, 1999). Altogether, these gender discrepancies highlight the need for continued research on academic achievement and standardized tests, particularly among college women.

Standardized testing has become an integral part of education culture in America. Socialization is a process through which individuals learn cultural norms and values from those around them (Vandell, 2000; Mulvenon, Stegman & Ritter, 2005; Guimond, 1999). In education, these norms can include students’ beliefs about academic success and performance on achievement test. Socialization researchers have argued that siblings and parents, as well as peer groups and teachers, are all important social influences on youth development (Vandell, 2000). Researchers have found that socialization in the academic arena manifests as performance on standardized tests and that academic success is emphasized as an integral part of education by students, teachers, parents, guidance counselors, and
administrators during high school (Mulvenon, Stegman & Ritter, 2005). Thus, students’ beliefs about academic success and standardized tests can be shaped by multiple social sources including parents, faculty, and peers.

Early social influences can impact students’ academic beliefs in young adulthood. Research suggests that among college students, both normative social influences such as family and peers and informational sources of influence such as faculty, as well as courses within their academic major account for attitude change and formation of beliefs during college (Guimond, 1999). For example, in one study, peer group identification, a normative social influence, was shown to influence military orientation whereas academic major, an informational source of influence, was associated with sociopolitical attitudes in students attending a conservative military university (Guimond, 1999). Findings also showed that these students became more conservative from their first to their third year of college. Moreover, in a review of the literature, Lampert (1993) emphasized the importance of faculty during college socialization because students with more frequent faculty interaction performed better academically and faculty encouragement is an important factor in a student’s decision to pursue graduate studies. Sax, Bryant, and Harper (2005) found, in their study of college students, that trivializing comments and actions of faculty (e.g., feeling as though a professor did not take one’s comments seriously in class) can have detrimental effects on female students’ academic confidence. Additionally, faculty interaction with students increases student academic persistence and decreases withdrawal from the university. Thus, as students continue to develop perceptions about education throughout high school and college, their interactions with college faculty and peers can influence their academic beliefs.

**Study Aims**

Given both the emphasis placed on academic achievement in college and the gender disparities found in academic achievement and standardized test performance, it is important that researchers and college faculty and staff understand the factors that can potentially shape academic success for college women and their attitudes and perceptions toward academic success and standardized tests. While studies to date have examined how cognitive factors impact school performance and academic matriculation, no research has explored the extent to which parents, teachers, and peers help shape and influence college women’s perceptions of standardized tests and their relevance to future academic success. Investigating the lasting effects of social influences that remain from high school and throughout college can help researchers and administrators better understand ways to pro-

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**FIGURE 1**

Mean attitudes and beliefs regarding academics and standardized tests.

![Bar chart showing mean attitudes and beliefs regarding academics and standardized tests.](image)
mote consistent academic and professional development for young women. Therefore, the research aims of the present descriptive study were twofold: (1) to examine college women’s beliefs (e.g., “If you do not test well, you cannot succeed”) about standardized tests and academic success and (2) to explore who or what has influenced those beliefs in high school and college. In light of socialization research and group socialization theory, we expected to find that social forces including family, teachers and peers will be influential in shaping students’ perceptions of standardized tests. Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of this investigation, we did not advance any specific hypotheses nor did we specify any hypotheses regarding the most or least influential social force.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants (N = 54; M age = 20.66, SD = 3.98, range = 18–30) were students from a women’s private liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States. We recruited respondents from a large psychology survey course as well as through on-campus flyers.

**Procedure**

Participants were given the option to complete the survey in a lab or to complete the survey on their own time and return it to the investigator (E.C.M). The primary investigator gave each participant a written informed consent and assigned each survey a participant number so that no identifying information could be found on the surveys. Respondents completed the measures used in this analysis as part of a 30 minute, self-report survey on academic attitudes and behaviors. First, students indicated their level of agreement to 10 statements (see Table 1 for specific items) regarding academics success and standardized tests using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Second, they reported whether or not parents, family, friends, teachers, counselors, college advisors or other sources (e.g., media) influenced their attitudes and perceptions regarding those 10 statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Influence During High School</th>
<th>Influence During College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In general, men perform better than women on standardized tests</td>
<td>7.4% 29.6% 25.9% 9.3% 7.4%</td>
<td>7.4% 18.5% 14.8% 37.5% 5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic minority groups under perform compared to whites</td>
<td>14.8% 27.8% 27.8% 7.4% 13.0%</td>
<td>14.8% 22.2% 27.8% 3.7% 9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized testing is the most important measure of intelligence</td>
<td>13.0% 16.7% 22.2% 13.0% 3.7%</td>
<td>9.3% 11.1% 7.4% 7.4% 3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school GPA determines college success</td>
<td>35.1% 38.9% 44.4% 38.9% 9.3%</td>
<td>13.0% 16.7% 14.8% 14.8% 7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you do not test well, you cannot succeed</td>
<td>13.0% 25.9% 27.8% 20.4% 3.7%</td>
<td>11.1% 9.3% 13.0% 7.4% 3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized tests are biased</td>
<td>16.7% 20.4% 24.1% 11.1% 5.6%</td>
<td>13.0% 27.8% 25.9% 1.9% 1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial success is dependent upon good test scores</td>
<td>16.7% 14.8% 7.4% 7.4% 7.4% 9.3%</td>
<td>11.1% 5.6% 5.6% 5.6% 5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice increases your chances of doing well</td>
<td>51.9% 46.3% 57.4% 55.6% 13.0%</td>
<td>35.2% 33.3% 48.1% 31.5% 9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized tests accurately measure intelligence</td>
<td>7.4% 16.7% 11.1% 11.1% 3.7%</td>
<td>7.4% 5.6% 3.7% 5.6% 3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance on the SAT determines performance on future tests</td>
<td>11.1% 13.0% 18.5% 16.7% 7.4%</td>
<td>5.6% 9.3% 9.3% 7.4% 5.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
during high school and college. The host college IRB approved all study protocol and procedure.

**Results**

We conducted descriptive analyses in SPSS to examine the research questions. Findings revealed a variety of different responses to each of the 10 statements as well as many sources influencing those beliefs (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

**Testing and Bias**

For the three statements regarding standardized tests and biases (“In general, men perform better than women on standardized tests”; “Ethnic minority groups tend to under perform on standardized tests when compared to White European Americans”; “Standardized tests are biased towards success of one particular ethnic group”) in general, respondents believed that men do not perform better than women on standardized tests ($M = 2.5, SD = 1.1$). Thirty percent of respondents indicated that their friends/peers influenced that belief and 26% indicated their teachers influenced that belief during high school. On average, students were neutral with respect to the belief that standardized tests are biased towards the success of one particular ethnic group ($M = 3.1, SD = 1.3$). The social influences for those perceptions were college peers (28%), college professors (26%) and high school teachers (24%). Additionally, students had neutral beliefs regarding the belief that ethnic minorities under perform compared to White Americans ($M = 3.2, SD = 1.3$). The social influences for this perception stemmed from college professors (28%), high school teachers (27%) and high school peers (27%).

**Testing and Intelligence**

Participants also reported their level of agreement to statements regarding the link between standardized tests and intelligence. On average, students disagreed with the statement “Standardized testing is the most important measure of intelligence” ($M = 1.3, SD = 0.7$). The highest reported social influence for that perception was teachers during high school (22%). On average, many students also disagreed with the statement that standardized tests accurately measure intelligence ($M = 1.6, SD = 0.7$); friends/peers were most influential to that belief (17%).

**Testing and Success**

Overall, students disagreed with all three statements regarding the link between standardized tests, grade point averages, and both academic and financial success. On average, students slightly disagreed with the notion that high school GPA determines college success ($M = 2.7, SD = 1.1$). Teachers (44%), friends/peers (39%) and counselors (39%) during high school were influential to many respondents. Participants tended to disagree ($M = 1.8, SD = 1.1$) with the idea that if you do not test well, you cannot succeed; friends (26%) and teachers (28%) were the most noted social influences. Finally, students were likely to disagree with the perception that financial success is dependent upon good test scores ($M = 2.0, SD = 1.0$). Parents and family (17%) and friends/peers (15%) were strong social influences for that belief.

**Discussion**

The present descriptive study was designed to examine perceptions endorsed by college women regarding academic success and standardized tests. Additionally, we considered the social influences that help shape these beliefs. Overall, findings showed that teachers, particularly during high school, were highly influential with respect to students’ attitudes and beliefs about standardized tests and academic success. Friends and peers were also very influential across all perceptions while parents and family were reported least frequently as a prominent influence. These findings are consistent with socialization theory that postulates that teachers and parents are just as influential in child and adolescent development as siblings and peer groups (Vandell, 2000). Additionally, these findings support prior research that has highlighted the importance of faculty in the formation of beliefs and in academic persistence among college women (Guimond, 1999, Lamont, 1993, & Sax, Bryant & Harper, 2005). Thus, faculty, teacher, and parental influence during high school and throughout college are important with respect to young women’s perceptions about academic success and the relevance of standardized tests throughout their college careers.

The present findings should be considered in light of several limitations. This study was conducted using self-reports; thus, it is possible that participants may have under- or over-reported their responses on
some of the survey questions. Furthermore, the present study was conducted at a selective women’s college, with a small sample size possibly limiting the generalizability of the results. Future research should include a larger sample of women at public universities and coeducational institutions. Additionally, in this investigation we did not correlate academic and standardized test perceptions with actual standardized test scores or academic performance. Future research should consider investigating the associations among social sources of academic influence, academic and standardized test perceptions, and actual performance on standardized tests.

Conclusions and Implications

The present investigation has several implications for educational programming and intervention efforts. Programming efforts geared towards positive academic reinforcement from parents, family, educators and administration seem to have a long-lasting effect and are therefore important to the success of young women during high school, undergraduate studies, and graduate educational pursuits. As a source of social influence, college counselors and student outreach programs can make use of the potential effect they have on young women, throughout high school and into undergraduate studies. For example, in the present study, undergraduate women thought that practice and exposure to testing formats would increase their chances of doing well. They also reported that this belief was most influenced by teachers and counselors during high school. Teachers and administrators can use this information to provide practice exams and test help sessions to further promote opportunities in higher education and academic excellence among women. In order to promote higher education and academic success among young women, parents and educators must understand the robust academic social influences that persist from high school through college.

References


