"The Growing Correlation Between Race and SAT Scores: New Findings From California" is a new study by Saul Geiser, published by the Center for Studies in Higher Education. The findings are based on the population of California residents who applied for admission to the University of California from 1994 through 2011, a sample of over 1.1 million students. The UC data show that socioeconomic background factors – family income, parental education, and race/ethnicity – account for a large and growing share of the variance in students’ SAT scores over the past twenty years. More than a third of the variance in SAT scores can now be predicted by factors known at students’ birth, up from a quarter of the variance in 1994. Of those factors, moreover, race has become the strongest predictor. Rather than declining in salience, race and ethnicity are now more important than either family income or parental education in accounting for test score differences. It must be cautioned that these findings are preliminary, and more research is needed to determine whether the California data reflect a broader national trend. But if these findings are representative, they have important implications for the ongoing debate over both affirmative action and standardized testing in college admissions.

Saul Geiser is a research associate at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. in sociology from UC Berkeley and taught there before joining UC’s Office of the President in 1981. Geiser served as director of admissions research for the UC system after Californians voted to end affirmative action in 1996, and he helped redesign UC admissions policy. His work has focused on issues of equity and predictive validity in college admissions, with the aim of identifying admissions criteria that have less adverse impact on low-income and minority applicants while remaining valid indicators of student performance in college. Geiser’s research on achievement testing has been influential in the College Board’s decision to revise the SAT in the direction of a more curriculum-based test. His work has contributed to the development of a number of new admissions policies, including UC’s policy on Eligibility in the Local Context, which guaranteed admission to the top four percent (and now top nine percent) of students in each California high school. In addition to admissions research, Geiser directed the evaluation of UC’s outreach programs to disadvantaged students and schools in California.