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College Admissions and the SAT

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UC looks beyond test scores for students

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By Richard C. Atkinson
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As is well known, the University of California's regents have rescinded UC's policy banning affirmative action. Proposition 209 is still the law, of course, and UC will continue to comply with it by excluding race and gender as considerations in admissions.

But in other ways, the process by which the university satisfies its commitment under the Master Plan for Higher Education to admit the top 12.5 percent of California high school students is changing. Some have suggested that UC's high academic standards are being sacrificed for the sake of diversity, but nothing could be further from the truth.

In reality, UC has embarked on a course of expanding access for students who have demonstrated high levels of achievement -- perhaps in ways that the university's previous admissions policies have overlooked -- while also maintaining the excellence for which it has been long renowned.

Excellence is not measured by grades and test scores alone. Many California students have substantial accomplishments that, while they may not show up in the raw numbers, merit consideration in UC admissions.

Who are these students? The gifted musician, the talented artist and the budding scientist. The student who performed at the top of the class in a rural school that lacked the resources to offer all the college preparatory opportunities available elsewhere. The youth who made steady gains in academic performance over the course of high school despite a background of poverty or violence, or one in which college simply was not seen as an option.

These students not only have much to gain from the UC experience, they also have much to contribute, and we want to welcome them to our campuses. With that in mind, UC is pursuing several initiatives to ensure that we do not think too narrowly about what constitutes achievement in the context of admissions. These initiatives include:

-- Eligibility in the local context: Implemented this year, ELC grants UC eligibility to the top 4 percent of the graduating class in each California high school, based on grades in UC-required courses. This ensures that high-performing students, including those from rural and urban schools, have access to UC regardless of the level of educational enrichment their schools can afford to offer.

-- Dual admissions: Under this proposal, the top 4 percent to 12.5 percent of students in each high school would be granted admission to UC, provided they complete a transfer program at a community college. Along with ELC, this would give students who have excelled academically in disadvantaged high schools a clear and affordable route to a UC degree.

-- Standardized tests: [UC is considering no longer requiring SAT I](#). It would be replaced with subject-based achievement tests, such as SAT II, that better measure students' high school success and that better predict their college capabilities. This change would establish a clear link between what is taught in high school and college entrance evaluations.

-- Comprehensive review: The UC faculty is considering evaluating all applicants comprehensively rather than setting aside a percentage who are reviewed on grades and test scores alone. This change would bring UC closer to the admissions models used by the nation's top private universities, with which UC competes for the best students.

These proposals are not about lowering standards or about benefiting one group at the expense of another. They are attempts to create fairness for all students, to expand opportunity, and to reward academic achievement and consider that achievement in the context of the educational opportunities available to each UC applicant.

These initiatives also would help us continue our progress under a partnership agreement with Gov. Gray Davis that holds UC accountable for maintaining quality and expanding access while providing UC with stable state funding. Maintaining this partnership, keeping student fees affordable (now about \$4,000 a year) and continuing the expansion of financial aid are all important elements in helping UC meet the challenge of dramatic enrollment growth over the course of this decade.