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**Merit as a Moving Target in
Post-Proposition 209 UC Admissions**

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Merit as a Moving Target in Post-Proposition 209 UC Admissions

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Broadening access to college opportunities and admissions to the University of California to reflect the racial and cultural diversity of the state has become increasingly difficult post-Proposition 209, banning affirmative action. University of California officials must contend with a “color-blind” admissions process, a growing presence of legal counsel, funding limitations, increasingly competitive applicant pools, and an evolving definition of the nature of merit.

This research offers a framework for understanding how public policy has affected university admissions of underrepresented students. This research seeks to answer the following question:

- Have the variables that serve as the traditional indicators for admission changed since the inception of SP-1 and Proposition 209?
- If so, how has this affected admitted student profiles in 1994 and 1999, in general, and particularly the profiles of underrepresented students?
- What are the implications of these changing profiles for determining UC eligibility?

This study focused on three case study campuses: UCLA, UC Davis, and UC Riverside. In addition to applicant and admissions data from the three case campuses for 1994 and 1999 (pre- and post-Proposition 209), researchers interviewed university officials and admissions officers and analyzed admissions data from these campuses over the past 15 years, in order to understand the shifts in UC admissions and enrollments that have occurred because of affirmative action changes.

Merit is a “moving target”

Among the key findings, this study found:

- GPA is a highly significant predictor of admission, with increasing salience post-209;
- SAT II Writing and SAT II Math scores increase an applicant’s likelihood of admission ($p < .001$);
- AP course enrollment improves the likelihood of admission post-209, with highly significant interaction effects ($p < .001$).

In addition, father’s education and parental income have a more positive effect on determining admissions for African American students at UCLA.

Although “merit” is commonly perceived as an individual attribute, these findings reveal the potential influence of factors over which individual students may have little control. Therefore, it might fairly be stated that college acceptance depends on a mix of students’ individual attributes and external conditions (such as the availability of advanced courses, parental

education, etc.). Finding an appropriate balance of these factors is a particular post-2009 challenge.

- This study found that merit is a “moving target,” as characterized by one respondent. Standards for admission (or, in the sense of “moving targets,” thresholds for successful competition for limited university seats) take the shape of an ascending curve. Students who have met challenges of getting good grades in the most rigorous coursework offered by their high schools may be denied admission because the admissions bar has been raised.

The logistic regression results confirm that admission standards follow increasingly competitive profiles. Because students of color have been disproportionately affected by selectively raised standards, and because increasing numbers of these students become qualified-but-not-competitive for admission, a system of genuinely merit-based admissions not only depends on the consistent application of qualification factors but on the relevance and fairness of the factors selected and the weights given to them.

This research confirms that elite sectors within ethnic groups may have a greater competitive advantage in admissions at highly and moderately selective campuses, as these students are likely to have access to relevant college preparatory curricula and additional educational supports that enhance their performance in high school coursework (GPA) and on standardized tests.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations suggest alternate policies for the University of California to consider when addressing the challenge of increasing underrepresented student access, enrollment, and success in the absence of affirmative action. They provide a basis for achieving greater equity based on valid representations of merit.

- **Eliminate the use of SAT I and SAT II scores in admissions decisions.** UC President Atkinson (2001) proposed eliminating the SAT I Verbal and Math scores in admissions decisions because they fail to reflect what students learn in high school. Further, it has been well documented that students of color experience disparate levels of achievement on standardized tests (see, for example, Valencia et al., 1990, 2002). Such gaps in performance serve to inhibit access and the overall competitiveness of underrepresented students. This study confirms the pertinent role that the SAT I Verbal, SAT I Math, SAT II Writing, and SAT II Math exams play in university admission. At both UCLA and UC Davis for example, the models indicated significant effects of test scores on increasing the likelihood of admission, both in 1994 and 1999 (Contreras, 2003). In addition, doubling the weight of the SAT II (as of the Fall 2001) has had little effect on the racial/ethnic pool of the applicants eligible for UC (Geiser & Studley, 2002).

Therefore, I propose eliminating both the SAT I and SAT II. These tests serve as gatekeepers for disadvantaged students, but lack a close correspondence to California’s curriculum standards. Eliminating the SAT I and II scores, and moving solely to the use of an exam based on California curriculum standards, would at least result in tests that reflect the curriculum. President Atkinson’s suggestion of developing an exam linked to state

standards supports existing claims that a single exam (Kirst, 2003) would be more appropriate in assessing student knowledge.

- **Establish an Equity Index that more systematically validates school context as an admissions consideration.**

Post-209 equity remains a real challenge for the UC system with respect to ensuring a level of access for underrepresented students. If SAT scores (or any test scores, for that matter) are to remain criteria for admission, the University should have equity index that reveals differences in opportunities as a basis for accommodating disadvantage. Such indicators could be used mitigate the exclusive reliance on outcomes (grades, test scores), and give fair, meritocratic, recognition to students who may have achieved stellar school accomplishments with fewer opportunities. While comprehensive review now takes into account some background issues reflecting the students themselves and the high school context, every admissions official I interviewed stated that they place their primary emphasis for admissions on academic criteria, as represented by tests and grades. Thus, a variable that has the potential to call increased attention to an applicant's adverse educational conditions may result in increased and fairer admissions of underrepresented students.

The equity index would be modeled after the work of UC ACCORD and the Indicators Project based at UCLA, which identifies schools' infrastructure resources for facilitating learning, achievement, and the potential for academic success as the student progresses through the pipeline (Oakes, 2003). For the purpose of UC admissions, the equity indicator would be a variable created, based on a number of resources to which all public school youth should be exposed in high school. Students would receive an equity index score that takes into account their access to a relevant and rigorous college preparatory curriculum (e.g., AP courses), appropriate resources and facilities (e.g., fully equipped science labs), academic and social supports (e.g., college and career counseling), and teacher quality. The equity index would consider the physical, human, and social resources present within a school and district, and would provide admissions officials with a better sense of the social and economic resources available to the applicant. Under comprehensive review, this index may provide a more systematic assessment of school context that better addresses issues of disadvantage.

- **Assess the impact of capping Grade Point Averages (GPA)**

As this study confirmed, GPA is a consistently significant predictor of admissions. Many students applying to the highly selective UC campuses have a GPA higher than 4.0, made possible by the UC admissions policy of awarding extra points for honors and AP courses. This leaves underrepresented students at a competitive disadvantage, since high schools in high poverty areas and with high proportions of students of color offer the fewest honors and AP courses. UC campuses should assess the impact of capping grade point averages in admissions decisions to provide a fairer assessment of academic achievement. Those students at the 4.0 level, for example, are highly qualified for UC admission. Capping GPAs at 4.0 would provide underrepresented students, particularly those applying to the highly selective UC campuses, a better likelihood of being competitively eligible for admission. Such a UC re-examination of its "extra-points" policy might begin with an historical review of the purposes and arguments on which this policy was based, and whether the policy remains or was ever a viable method for achieving UC academic purposes.

- **Implement a parity standard in assessing the impact of admissions policies**

This study illustrates the wide disparities in both access and achievement, particularly for underrepresented students of color. A parity standard—one that focuses on racial/ethnic composition of students in the K-12 system, graduating cohorts, UC-eligible pool, and California population—establishes a framework for accountability to California residents, and is one method of adhering to the public responsibility of the UC system.

Gaps in access convey the need for data that make the University of California more systematically aware and accountable for providing equitable access to all California residents. While access and enrollment data exist, there has been very little effort to create benchmarks to assess progress toward inclusion and diversity. Since both the California Master Plan for Higher Education and the UC Office of the President have clear goals and objectives to increase diversity throughout the UC campuses, studies using a parity standard can provide state and institutional leaders with a better sense of whether the UC system is meeting these stated goals.

Conclusion

In a state as ethnically and culturally diverse as California, the discourse around higher education access and equity must shift from merit as an individualized reward for past performance (Banks, 2001) to merit as a reward that combines both achievement and the potential beneficial outcomes for society using a more direct and systematic approach, acknowledging the benefits that diverse individuals and groups contribute to the state. Since California is the bellwether for national policy changes, how this state deals with its diverse populace will set the example for the nation. Thus, the definition of merit must incorporate the value that underrepresented students bring to a creating a functional multicultural society.

With such dramatic shifts in the California population, the state has witnessed an entirely different K-12 student composition. These demographic shifts illustrate both the challenge and opportunity for California to fully invest in its residents. The Supreme Court decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger* on June 23, 2003, which reaffirmed the use of race in university admissions, provides a window of opportunity for greater accountability within higher education institutions and systems to better serve underrepresented students. University access requires deliberate intervention if the disadvantaged communities of color are to move beyond the historically low levels of higher education access. Equitable access to public higher education, and to the UC system in particular, enhances the capacity of the state to develop a talented workforce and leadership to sustain the state's economic infrastructure. Options for all residents to fully participate in the social and economic fabric of the state will result in greater payoffs for individuals, the state, and society as California continues to shift to a multicultural reality.

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