

New Criteria for College Admissions

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WHEN A DECISION in a Texas case and one by California voters on a ballot proposal banned affirmative action in higher education in those states in 1996, the reaction ranged from jubilation to outrage. In *Hopwood v. Texas*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit ruled that race cannot be used as a criterion to achieve a diverse student body. The state attorney general interpreted the ruling as prohibiting the consideration of race or ethnicity in all internal school policies in higher education institutions across the state, including admissions, financial aid, scholarships and fellowships, and recruitment and retention. This interpretation is currently the law of the land in Texas.

Meanwhile, in California, 54 percent of those voting during the November 1996 general election supported Proposition 209, which effectively ended the practice of using affirmative action as one of the criteria in college admissions. As a result of these two victories, long-term opponents of affirmative action felt that a long-overdue end to racial bias in college admissions could finally be achieved. Supporters of affirmative action, on the other hand, feared that the most competitive state universities would be purged of promising minority students.

Too often lost in the sometimes-acrimonious debate over affirmative action, however, has been an attempt to understand the profound changes in university admissions criteria caused by changes in affirmative action policy.

Indeed, many people have no idea what changes have been made in college admissions criteria. But understanding these changes and their possible implications is crucial. Policymakers need to know if the new criteria give state universities a way of maintaining diversity in spite of the ban. High school teachers and counselors need to consider how the criteria may affect their students' chances of getting into the colleges of their choice.

Prior to the banning of affirmative action, both the University of Texas and the University of California—like many state university systems—admitted students by calculating indices of high school performance and SAT/ACT scores. The higher the grade point average or high school class rank, the lower the SAT/ACT scores needed for admission. The same basic calculation was made for minority students, only some were admitted with lower grade point averages and SAT scores than nonminority students. Admissions officials considered race and ethnicity in their decisions for students on the borderline of not being admitted.

Proposition 209 in California and the federal appellate ruling in the Texas case stopped this affirmative-action-bound practice in its tracks. Universities had no choice but to radically overhaul their admissions criteria, hoping that the new criteria they developed would somehow continue to promote minority admissions while adhering to the law banning the consideration of race. A grand experiment in university admissions began.

For a specific example of how new admissions criteria are being used, we can look at the University of California, Davis. The university employs three criteria in its admissions policy. For 60 percent of those admitted to Davis, the university uses an academic index of SAT I, SAT II, and grade point average. For the remaining 40 percent of its students, it also uses a campus-enhancement quotient and an academic-potential, campus-contribution index. Some University of California campuses have decided to use a number of other criteria, including being a first-generation university student; attending a high school with a low-socioeconomic student body; demonstrating marked improvement in 11th grade; and demonstrating specific instances of perseverance. In essence, these campuses are seeking nontraditional applicants who will maintain or increase diversity.

Also considered at many California campuses, including Davis, are factors over which the applicant has had little direct control and which he or she has had to surmount. An applicant, for instance, may have been faced with unusual family disruptions, certain medical or emotional problems, an adverse immigrant experience, an environment of drug or alcohol abuse, a lack of academic role models, or the need to learn English.

While initially refusing to admit all students who score above a certain class rank, the University of California's board of regents approved last month a plan for admitting the top 4 percent. ("Calif. To Guarantee Top Graduates Entry to UC System," *Education Week*, March 31, 1999.)

Projections suggest that going further and admitting the top 10 percent would reduce by half the number of students enrolling in the university system from high-scoring-SAT schools in largely affluent communities such as Palo Alto and Huntington Beach.

The University of Texas, unlike the University of California, accepts all students from the top 10 percent of their high school classes, regardless of SAT/ACT scores. After accepting the top 10 percent, the university considers other applicants based on 18 criteria. Some of these more conventional criteria include a consideration of essays, the number of college units taken, leadership abilities, work experience, and community service. The university also uses other criteria similar to those being used in California. These include being from a low-income or single-parent home, speaking more than one language, and attending a school operating under a court-ordered desegregation plan.

What, if anything, will the criteria now being used by these state university systems do to foster diversity and the completion of degrees by minorities? Right now, no one can say for certain. New admissions criteria were created with scant research about their possible effects—effects that will only become fully apparent over time.

Based on what is known so far, however, it is possible to make a few preliminary observations. Asians have seemed to benefit in both Texas and California from the new criteria. In 1997, fewer African-Americans were admitted to the most competitive University of California campuses (Berkeley and Los Angeles), but more were admitted to less selective campuses like Riverside and Santa Cruz. In Texas, the highly competitive University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M did not experience much of an increase in students from the top 10 percent of their high school classes despite the state's automatic-admission policy for this group. The geographic pattern of where students choose to attend college appears difficult to change, at least in Texas. Forty fewer blacks were admitted to the Austin campus in 1997, despite a 3.4 percent increase in total applications for that year.

The data this spring on students admitted to University of California campuses for the fall show promising signs of progress, with officials crediting better outreach and more comprehensive selection criteria with raising the number of underrepresented minority students by 9 percent from the previous year. ("Black, Hispanic Admissions Rebound at University of California," *Education Week*, April 14, 1999.)

One thing is certain, however, about the new admissions criteria: They are a lot more difficult for students, parents, and the public to understand than the old grade-point-

average-and-SAT index. Students in California and Texas can no longer simply calculate their chances of admission from a chart using this index, now that qualitative factors such as persistence and determination are also being considered. It cannot be assumed, however, that the more complex criteria are necessarily a bad thing. A major drawback of the traditional GPA/SAT indices is their tendency to overlook the more intangible factors that predict success at universities, while at the same time eliminating the very kind of nontraditional students that universities wish to attract. The new criteria—complex as they may be—may signal to minority students that they are welcome at state universities. In any case, they will require more thorough counseling of high school students than in the past, because of their complexity and the fact that they are more subject to change.

In considering the impact these new admissions criteria are having, policymakers must look not only at the number of minority students being admitted, but also at the number of students who are actually completing degrees. Currently, the emphasis in admissions is based solely upon diversity, which could cause a backlash if voters perceive that students admitted under the new criteria are performing poorly in university classes or failing to graduate.

The end of affirmative action in Texas and California has launched an era of experimentation and volatility in selective-university admissions, and even more changes are likely in these states in the years ahead. Rather than spending all our time celebrating or condemning the banning of affirmative action, we must scrutinize the impact new admissions criteria are having. And we must not settle on any one set of criteria until all of us—educators, parents, and the public—have had a long and fruitful debate about their effectiveness and fairness in allocating scarce places at selective universities.