

Defining the Top of the Class: A New Admissions Game

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THE END OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION for competitive admission to universities has created a search for new admissions criteria that will enhance equity and access. Many universities have included new concepts such as persistence, overcoming handicaps, first in family to attend a university, and attending a high school that has sent few pupils to any college or university. But the most visible solution has been to automatically accept students ranked at the top of their class, regardless of the high schools they have attended or the courses they have taken.

Public universities in Texas now admit the top 10 per cent of each graduating class and, beginning next fall, Florida universities will accept the top 20 per cent. The University of California admits the top four per cent to one of the eight general campuses in its system but specifies the courses that must be taken. While the impact upon minority enrollment from these policies is unclear, they should help to increase both geographic representation and the numbers of students from high schools with historically low university enrollment rates.

While defining the top of the class appears to be straightforward, it has proven to be more complex and elusive than originally thought. This new admissions game will produce winners and losers, as well as students, parents and school districts who learn how to play the game better. What counts is not merely good grades, but better grades than one's peers.

A survey of 2,200 high schools by Patricia Riordan, dean of admissions at George Mason University, concluded that some schools give extra weight to certain courses but others do not. The policies run the gamut and inequities are created. For example, for decades Illinois has been using high school class rank (HSCR) as one-half of an admissions index, with ACT scores for the other half. But Illinois universities and the Illinois Board of Higher Education have never specified how high schools should compute class rank. Consequently, high schools use a variety of techniques and weighting systems to determine HSCR. High schools include different courses in their calculations-- some schools count college prep courses for the most part but others include electives and vocational classes. Some types of courses are more heavily weighted but some schools compute HSCR in several ways and then report the ranking that provides local students with the best chance of being admitted.

This system does not provide valid and reliable comparisons of HSCR for university admission. At the University of Illinois, disputes about class rank have led to the creation of a group of special review schools, mostly in suburban Chicago. If freshman grades from these schools are high enough, their class rankings are adjusted upward compared to the rest of the state. Since most high schools use the same class rank system for many years, Illinois has worked out most of the problems with its HSCR criteria through encouraging high schools to continue to use the same ranking system (whatever it may be) for many years. But the Illinois experiences demonstrate the complexity of the issue.

All public universities in Texas now accept the top 10 per cent from each of the state's high schools but there are no course requirements. Non-academic electives and vocational courses can be crucial factors in helping students reach the top 10 per cent more easily, but more difficult courses might be more appropriate for admissions purposes. It will be interesting to follow Texas university grades and graduation rates for students with different course preparation patterns. Texas officials need to monitor whether school districts are adjusting class rank to give their students an advantage at selective institutions like the main Texas A & M campus in College Station and the University of Texas at Austin.

If universities do not think HSCR is valid and reliable, they may revert to placing more emphasis on ACT and SAT scores. The top 10 per cent policy in Texas could produce classes of freshmen who have taken an extremely wide range of courses, but a recent U.S. Department of Education study stresses that specific course-taking patterns in high school lead to higher college graduation rates. This study finds that specific courses such as one math course beyond Algebra II are crucial to university graduation. The goal, after all, should be to graduate students, not simply admit them.

Florida's top 20% calculation is left to each district or high school to calculate, but all top 20% students must complete 19 college prep courses including 3 units of math (Algebra I or higher), 3 units of science (two lab), and 2 units of foreign language. Some Florida minority groups are concerned that the language requirement will keep many minority students out of the top 20% because community colleges do not emphasize language preparation. Differences in top 20% calculation among districts will lead to significant differences in who is part of the top 20%, especially when electives, honors, and AP courses are given extra weights. State supporters of the top 20% contend more minorities who attend inner-city or rural high schools with lower grade point averages will now be eligible for university admission without needing to take SAT. But some local educators predict non-minority students from high average grade point schools may transfer to these low grade point average high schools in order to be in the top 20%.

The University of California has chosen a different and better route than Florida or Texas. As in Florida, students who rank in the top four per cent of their high school class will be eligible for a place somewhere in the UC system but will not be guaranteed admission to their first-choice campus. UC also has revised its policies governing admissions--as opposed to eligibility-- at the most over-subscribed UC campuses, to add high school class rank as a

selection criterion. But this is only one of many criteria and does not guarantee automatic admission to those campuses.

UC is requesting each high school to forward the transcripts of the top 10 per cent of their graduating seniors based on grade-point average, as defined at the school. UC staff then will analyze the transcripts to determine the top four per cent at each school, based on the student's performance in 11 specific academic courses. These include four years of English, three years of math, two years of history/social science, two years of laboratory science, two years of foreign language and two years of college elective courses. Beginning in 2003, one year of visual or performing arts also will be required.

Since some students in the top four per cent will be identified at the end of the junior year, only 11 of the 15 courses will be required at that time: three years of English, three of math, one year of history/social science, one year of lab science, one of foreign language and two units from other courses on the required list. Top-ranked students must complete the remainder of the 15-course sequence during the senior year, and maintain an appropriate grade-point average, in order to complete their eligibility for UC. This is expected to result in more students passing their university courses and proceeding to graduation.

At first, the high school class rank approach to admissions looks simple and straightforward. But students, parents and schools will utilize any ambiguity to help them gain entrance to highly-selective campuses. Consequently, high schools must be given specific guidance about how to compute class rank. Policymakers need to establish their objectives for a high school class rank system, and to be sure that class rank provides both equal opportunity and intensive academic preparation.