

EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Merit-Based Admissions and Diversity at the University of California

Michael Lynch

On 20 July 1995, the Board of Regents of the University of California, led by regent Ward Connerly and California Governor Pete Wilson, reversed more than 30 years of increasingly race-conscious decision-making at the country's most prestigious public system of higher education. In the midst of what turned out to be a one-day media circus that rivaled the O.J. trial, the regents passed a resolution stating "the University of California shall not use race, religion, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin as criteria for admission to the University or to any program of study." In addition, the regents increased the proportion of freshmen the seven schools must admit based solely on academic performance from a range of 40 to 60 percent to 50 to 75 percent.

Predictably, the regents' decision was met with outrage by a small but noisy band of activist professors and students. Although a poll conducted by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut found that a plurality of the faculty supported the ideas driving the regents' policy, the schools' academic senates voiced unanimous opposition to the policy. In the same vein, while it is widely reported by the media that students are against favoring certain groups, as unlikely a source as the Berkeley student newspaper editorialized for the policy.

Regardless of how the students and faculty feel about the policy—it stands, at least for now. And with the passage of the California Civil Rights Initiative last November, which more generally prohibits group preference in the state, there is little chance of reversal before its implementation in the fall of 1998. So what does the regents' historic decision mean for that holy grail of contemporary higher education—diversity?

To address this question, some delineation of scope is called for. Are we talking about diversity in American higher education? The University of California as a whole? Or the most competitive schools—UC Berkeley and UCLA? It is also important to define diversity, which is a rather opaque and nebulous term. I shall use diversity in the same sense it is used by those who do the admitting to the University of California: Diversity equals African Americans; Hispanics, which in California are neatly broken down into Chicanos (Mexi-

can Americans) and Latinos (all others from Latin America); American Indians; and, at times, Filipinos.

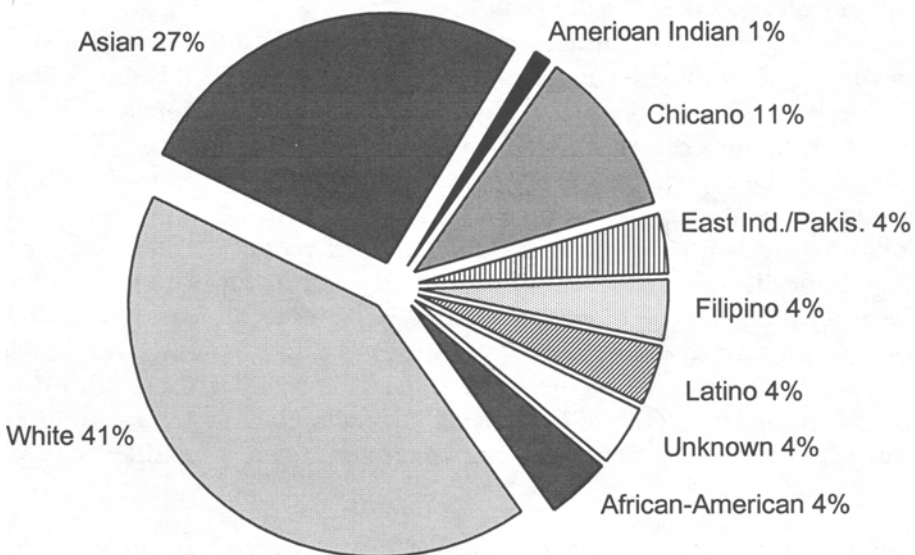
Informed but by-no-means categorical forecasts for change include:

- The UC policy will have no effects on diversity aggregated across all of America's universities.
- The UC policy may or may not decrease diversity in the University of California system as a whole, depending upon the choices made by individuals who are eligible for admission—and thus guaranteed a spot in the system—but not up to the exacting standards of Berkeley, UCLA, and UC San Diego.
- The UC policy, if adhered to, will surely have effects on diversity at individual schools, decreasing diversity at the most competitive schools, Berkeley, UCLA, and UC San Diego and possibly increasing it at less demanding institutions.

To trace these results, it is useful to examine the status quo for the University of California's undergraduates. Figure 1 illustrates the ethnic composition of the UC system's entering freshmen of 1994.

This aggregate data obscures an interesting phenomenon—minority students are concentrated heavily at the two most competitive schools—Berkeley and UCLA. This is precisely in inverse relation to their prior educational qualifications and, judging from limited data released by Berkeley and UCLA, their academic performance. African Americans make up 4.2 percent of the UC population, but 5.9 percent of Berkeley's and 6.2 percent of UCLA's. Hispanics

FIGURE 1
New Undergraduate Domestic Student Enrollment
University of California, 1994



Source: Office of the President, The University of California

(Chicanos and Latinos) are 14.1 percent of the UC population but represent 14.7 percent at Berkeley and 16.8 percent at UCLA. Forty-three percent of targeted minorities in the UC system attended these two schools in 1994, whereas Berkeley and UCLA accounted for 36 percent of all UC undergraduates.

This distribution is not the result of individual academic efforts and achievements, but of imbalances of race and ethnicity in the admissions processes.¹ It is at these two schools where the regents' policy will undoubtedly have the greatest effects, increasing the enrollment of whites, the only group underrepresented at Berkeley, and Asians. A study assembled by central administrators at the University of California prior to the regents' vote concluded that, if schools substituted economic disadvantage for consideration of race and ethnicity in undergraduate admission, the number of African Americans at Berkeley would drop by 52 percent and Hispanic enrollment would fall 24 percent. Gaining spots at Berkeley would be the "non-diverse" Asians, whose enrollment might increase by as much as 29 percent, Filipinos, who would see a 25 percent increase, and whites, whose enrollment would increase by 0.6 percent. Notice that, under this scenario, it is Asians, not whites, for whom weightings based on race present the major obstacle in admissions. It is probable, however, that if the simulation simply went to a race- and ethnic-neutral admission process, whites would increase their admissions more significantly, as the weighing of economic disadvantage favors Asians, a proportion of which are immigrants and thus more prone to come from lower income families.

An examination of admissions at UCLA and Berkeley shows why excluding race from consideration will result in a significant reduction, at least in the short term, of officially diverse individuals at these two schools. The University of California's mandate is to educate the top 12.5 percent of the state's graduating high school seniors. To be eligible for a spot at one of the eight undergraduate campuses, individuals must complete standard precollege course requirements while placing academically in the top 12.5 percent of the graduating class.² This top 12.5 percent, however, is a broad range. Individuals at the top have taken many advance placement courses and are eligible not only for UC admission but are also sought after by such schools as Harvard, Stanford, and Yale. At the bottom of this band are individuals who, while qualified for the University of California, are B-plus students who have taken standard high school courses. "There are huge differences in abilities between the top and bottom of this band," states Dr. Rae Lee Siporin, director of undergraduate admissions at UCLA. In 1996, Dr. Siporin received roughly 28,000 applications, approximately 9,500 of which were from students with GPAs of 4.0. She accepted just under 11,000 students to enroll an entering class of approximately 3,650 freshmen.

The dilemma faced by Dr. Siporin, who could admit virtually a whole class of 4.0 students, is that the preponderance of those at the top end of the eligible band are not members of minority groups. In other words, officially "diverse" individuals are clustered at the bottom of the band. UCLA already

accepts every minority who is in the upper end of the band. Its admissions staff applies race and ethnicity as factors to choose from the preponderance of minorities clustered at the lower end of the band. After the regents' policy takes effect in fall 1998, this avenue is closed. According to Siporin, UCLA will no longer be able to acquire those students because every other factor—socio-economic status, regional diversity, overcoming adversity—is also present in other groups, including Asians and Caucasians, who have better academic credentials. “The new policy doesn’t give us any new tools that we weren’t already using at UCLA,” stated Siporin. “All it does is take away race and ethnicity.”

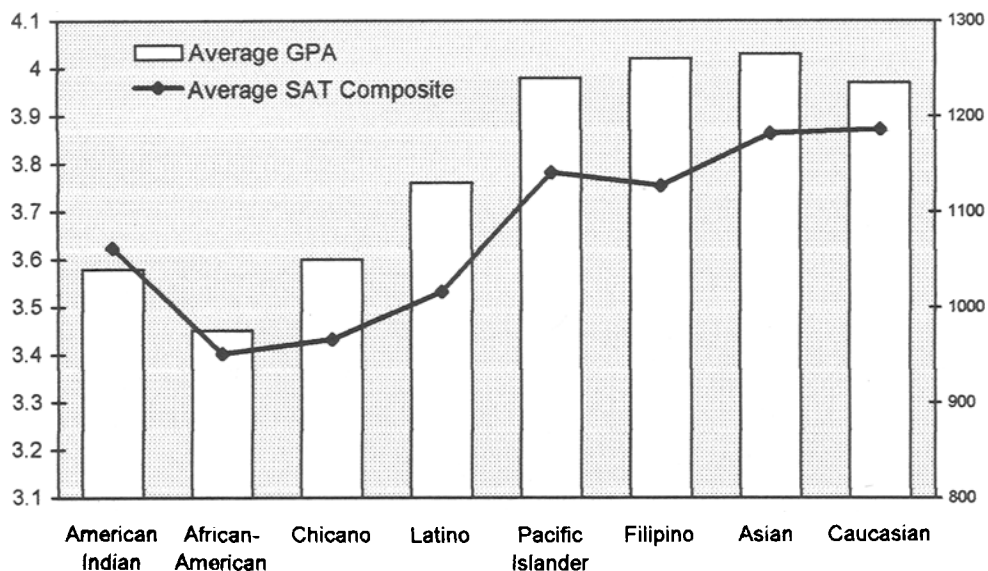
Under the old system, which is in place until fall 1998, Dr. Siporin ensures diversity by choosing 60 percent of the class based on grades and test scores alone, and then using supplemental criteria, relying heavily on race and ethnicity, but also including other factors, for the remaining 40 percent of the class. Qualifications of 1994 freshmen are broken down by group in Figure 2. In practice, this produces two distinct approaches for admission into UCLA. For white or Asian applicants, grades and test scores are paramount. In 1994, 95 percent of Caucasians and 83 percent of Asians were admitted based solely on academic criteria. The average GPA for this group, with credit for advanced placement classes, was 4.17. The combined SAT was 1268. Only 12 percent of African Americans and 17 percent of Hispanics were admitted this way. For these students there are two other avenues for admission. A second track utilizing a combination of academic achievement and such criteria as race and income yielded approximately 16 percent of students in 1994. Thirty-five percent of African Americans and 40 percent of Hispanics were accepted on this track in 1994, which had an overall GPA of 3.86 and a combined SAT of 1019.

A third track, however, is likely to be abolished by the regents' vote. This track, which admits students after they have been thoroughly evaluated by a committee, accepts more than half of all black students with an average GPA of 3.34. It also accounts for 41 percent of the Hispanic students, with an average GPA of 3.47. Roughly 6 percent of Asians and 2 percent of whites came in this way. This third track had an overall average GPA of 3.49 and an overall average combined SAT score of 937. These students, while UC eligible, would not be granted admission into UCLA without special preference.

“Because we can’t use race to add into the criteria, it will be harder to admit these students at the bottom end of the 12.5 percent band,” states Siporin. “This means that we are likely to see drops in the admit rates of the minorities.” Many suggest using socioeconomic factors to ensure diversity, but this is not likely to work. “For us, black students in the bottom end of the pool are not particularly disadvantaged,” Siporin notes. “Most of our black population is more middle class than not.” While nobody can predict what the freshman class of 1998 will look like, Siporin is sure of one thing: there will be a drop in minorities.

Berkeley faces a similar situation. To insure diversity, it accepted roughly 50 percent of its 1995 entering class based solely on academic criteria. The average

FIGURE 2
Academic Indicators for Enrolling Freshmen
University of California, Los Angeles, 1994

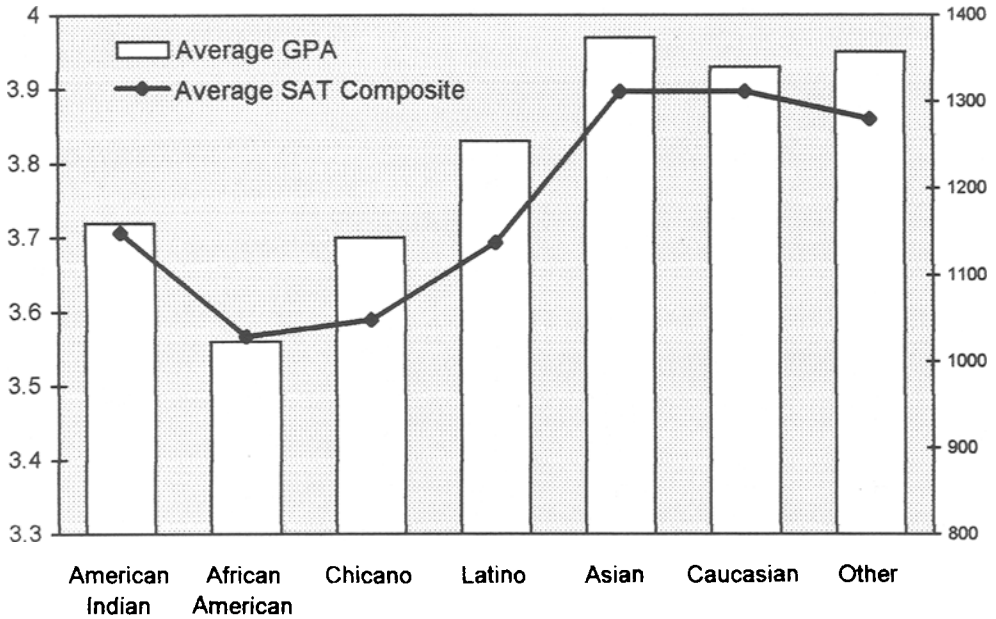


Source: UCLA Office of Academic Budget Planning

GPA for this group was 3.99 (unlike UCLA, Berkeley caps GPAs at 4.0, which produces a lower average score) and an average combined SAT score of 1363. Figure 3 gives average GPA and SAT scores for the different groups represented by students accepted in 1995. Sixty-seven percent of whites and 71 percent of Asians were admitted in this category. By contrast, only 23 of the 552 African Americans admitted came in under this category as did 9 percent of Hispanics. For the other half of admits, Berkeley uses a highly race-loaded matrix, going as far as to give preference to wealthy out-of-state minorities over untargeted middle-class Californians. In a particularly telling statistic, 17 percent of African Americans are admitted by exception, meaning they are not in the top 12.5 percent band, which is four times as many as African Americans who are admitted based on academic criteria alone. The average GPA for this group is 3.03. Overall, Berkeley's 1995 racial admission system produced SAT gaps of almost 300 points, with the combined average for whites and Asians being 1312 and the respective combined averages for Hispanics and blacks being 1067 and 1029. In fact, the average GPA of whites rejected, 3.66, was higher than the average GPA of African Americans accepted, 3.56.

It is clear that, without race and ethnicity as admission factors, the minority populations at Berkeley and UCLA will decrease. It remains to be seen by how much.

FIGURE 3
Qualifications of Applicants Accepted (Not Enrolled)
University of California at Berkeley, 1995



Source: UC Berkeley, Office of Undergraduate Admissions

If the shockingly bad news is that so few “diverse individuals” could make it into the University of California’s most competitive schools under their own academic steam, then the good news is that this *need* not have any effect on diversity in the wider UC system. It probably will, though. Recall two things. First, UC officials constantly stress that, although they lower standards for favored minority members at the most competitive schools, these individuals are all qualified for the UC system. Second, minorities, in inverse relation to their academic qualifications, are disproportionately represented at the UC’s two most competitive schools. In so far as the first assertion is true, then what the regents’ policy might produce is a shifting of the ethnic mix. What Berkeley and UCLA lose in diversity, UC Santa Cruz and UC Santa Barbara gain. UC administrators defend race-based admissions at the top schools by claiming that all eligible students are offered a place somewhere in the system. A recent investigation of Berkeley’s admissions by the United States Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights found that Berkeley did not discriminate, in part because “by state law, all UC eligible students must receive admission to a UC Campus.” It continued, “Thus, no student would experience exclu-

sion from the opportunity to receive a University of California Education." The direct implication, of course, is that UC Santa Cruz (a school I attended for two years) is equivalent to UC Berkeley. While this may be, the logic must be universal. If these schools are of equivalent quality for whites and Asians, so too they must be of equivalent quality for members of more sought-after groups.

It is probable, however, that UC may experience a decline in diversity, especially in the short run. A black or Hispanic denied admission to UCLA may be accepted to UC Santa Cruz, but that does not mean he will attend this school. The scarcity of high-performing minorities is not a phenomenon specific to California. Most schools nationwide are under tremendous pressure to reflect the complexion of the community in their enrollment. Thus, a student not taken by Berkeley under its rigorous requirements may well be offered admission, along with an aid package, to other prestigious schools. "These individuals are being sought after by all of the public institutions, even the Big Ten schools," notes UCLA's Siporin. "These schools would give their right arm to get the students we will have to turn down. I am not sure that if these students don't get into UCLA or Berkeley but they get into UC Santa Barbara or UC Santa Cruz that they will go there," Siporin adds. "I think this is more wishful thinking than reality."

Indeed, yield rates (the proportion of students admitted who actually enroll) support this scenario. While yields vary from year to year, Siporin notes that, at UCLA, 25 percent of the students in the top of the band actually enroll. Yield rates move in inverse relation to academic credentials, with nearly 60 percent of those in the bottom of the band enrolling. While yield rates for diverse individuals move along similar lines, they are lower than the average, indicating many academic options until they get to the very bottom, where the rates tend to get closer to the norm.


This indicates that UC may lose "diversity," once bereft of race as an admission tool. But if the goal is simply to provide educational opportunity for favored minorities, it should be some consolation that students rejected from UCLA and Berkeley are getting an education elsewhere. Indeed, the only scenario in which overall educational inclusivity is diminished as a result of the regents' policy is if individuals, aware that the admissions process is no longer rigged in their favor or that they must settle for less than Berkeley or UCLA, drop out of the running for college altogether.

It seems likely that short-term effects will include both a decrease in numbers of certain minorities at the two most competitive schools and a similar decrease in diverse individuals in the UC system as a whole. This upsets many, including UCLA's Siporin, who fears the loss of diversity at her school. But, unless the University of California has been admitting unqualified students, which it claims it hasn't, the new policy will not turn away anyone who is currently eligible for a UC education.

Notes

1. See Michael Lynch, "Choosing by Color: Affirmative Action at the University of California," a 1995 report from the Claremont Institute, Claremont, CA; and Michael Lynch, "Ethnicity as Destiny: An Examination of Race-Based Admissions at the University of California at Berkeley," a 1996 study from the Pacific Research Institute, San Francisco, CA.
2. See Michael Lynch, "Manufacturing Equal Outputs in a World of Unequal Inputs," a 1996 report from the Pacific Research Institute, San Francisco, CA.

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