

# The Politics of Admissions in California

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For most of California's history, University of California admissions policy excited passions only among high school seniors and their parents. Things have changed a lot. What used to be considered boring is now front page news. Indeed, the national media hang on every word spoken by UC President Richard Atkinson about the subject. When he says he wants to phase out the SAT it gets reported in newspapers, not just in California, but in New York,<sup>1</sup> Chicago,<sup>2</sup> Washington,<sup>3</sup> Chattanooga, Tennessee,<sup>4</sup> and Dubuque, Iowa.<sup>5</sup> It even shows up in the press in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

The reason for this peculiar change is simple: The issue of UC admissions standards has—unfortunately—become intertwined with another vitally important issue in higher education—whether members of underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities should receive special preferences for admission.<sup>7</sup> And that issue excites passions both on and off campus.

In 1996, California's Proposition 209 outlawed racial and gender preferences in, among other things, public education.<sup>8</sup> That law prevents preference advocates from simply adding 300 extra SAT points to the scores of black or Mexican-American applicants as had been the practice at UC-San Diego prior to its passage.<sup>9</sup> Preference supporters were temporarily put off balance. But they are now promoting policies that are designed to recreate the pre-Proposition 209 world to the extent they can.

It has now become apparent that the dominant strategy by former Proposition 209 opponents for altering the racial composition of the UC student body is the de-emphasis or elimination of standardized tests. For example, two years ago, civil rights groups filed a lawsuit against the UC arguing that standardized tests like the SAT discriminate against blacks and Hispanics.<sup>10</sup> Their argument is essentially that, on average, subject to a lot of individual variation, blacks and Hispanics don't do as well on the test as whites and Asians.

These civil rights groups were able to enlist the Clinton administration. When the UC Regents had just adopted their policies against racial and gender preferences and the Proposition 209 campaign was just getting underway, White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta called the Regents' act a "terrible mistake" and ordered a Department of Justice investigation of all federal funds

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received by the University of California.<sup>11</sup> When voters adopted Proposition 209 anyway, Assistant Secretary of Education for Civil Rights Norma Cantu stepped up to the plate. Calling standardized tests a potential civil rights violation, she took the bold step of issuing draft “guidelines” that would have strong-armed colleges and universities into de-emphasizing or eliminating the SAT on the ground that, again, some minority groups, on the whole, score lower. Only the uproar that ensued from schools outside California caused her to modify the guidelines.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, when Atkinson recently made headlines by calling for the phasing out of the SAT, it was not a bolt from the blue. It was his response to this long campaign.

Atkinson argued for “a more well-rounded approach” to admissions—one that emphasizes what applicants “have accomplished during four years of high school, taking into consideration their opportunities” rather than their scores on the SAT aptitude test.<sup>13</sup>

Atkinson’s announcement of what he likes to call a “holistic”<sup>14</sup> admissions policy has been called bold and courageous.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it is neither of these things. It is a reaction to political pressure—from civil rights organizations that favor race-based admissions, from Washington, and from Sacramento—to alter the racial composition of the UC class. Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, Assembly Speaker Robert Hertzberg and others have demanded that the UC admit more black and Hispanic students and hence fewer Asians and whites. They’ve threatened his budget. This is Atkinson’s way of bending to their will.<sup>16</sup>

Sadly, the de-emphasis of the SAT will result in less prepared students attending the UC. It will lower academic standards. Of course, if the UC goes along, it won’t be the first time a university has lowered academic standards in order to exclude students from disfavored groups. Eighty years ago, Ivy League universities complained of being overrun with Jewish students. The problem—if one can call it that—was that Jewish students tended to do quite well on the college boards—so well that it was difficult to turn them away without displaying obvious bigotry. A more subtle strategy had to be developed.

And it was. Harvard, Yale, and other elite universities announced that they were not interested in test-taking grinds; they wanted well-rounded students of good character instead. Some administrators were not the least shy about admitting that this change was the result of what they called the “Hebrew problem.” “To prevent a dangerous increase in the proportion of Jews,” Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell wrote, admissions decisions should be based on “a personal estimate of character on the part of the Admissions authorities.”<sup>17</sup> The jargon was a little different. They tended to use the word “well-rounded”; today admissions officers prefer New Age words like “holistic.” But the effect was the same.

Not surprisingly, during this period, the admissions officers found WASPish preppies to be the more well-rounded. That was the intent in adopting these highly subjective criteria. The term “well-rounded” was simply code language.

Admissions officers didn't care how well-rounded these applicants really were; they cared whether the applicants came from the "right" family and the "right" prep school. As a result of these "holistic" policies, the number of Jewish students at Harvard dropped dramatically during the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>18</sup>

Now history seems poised to repeat itself. This time, the complaint is too many Asian and white (including immigrant) students at the UC. Clinton himself warned against the passage of Proposition 209 by arguing that "there are universities in California that could fill their entire freshman classes with nothing but Asian Americans."<sup>19</sup> I've appeared on talk shows on more than one occasion in which callers, without a trace of irony, argue that it's not fair to others that Asian students study too much. Naturally, university administrators seize upon subjective judgments as an effective way to take care of the problem, just as they did years ago. Indeed, the latest Atkinson proposal is the fourth in a series (two of which have gone into effect), since the passage of Proposition 209, to de-emphasize the SATs and hence increase the importance of other, often more nebulous, factors like "opportunity." As before, these measures will be arbitrarily administered and will ultimately work to lower academic standards.

Is this policy legal? Not if the proposal is, as it seems to be, merely an effort to evade Proposition 209's prohibition on preferential treatment based on race or ethnicity. For Proposition 209, intent to discriminate (or grant preferential treatment) is the crucial consideration—whether one is making "retail" decisions about a particular candidate or "wholesale" decisions about selection criteria. If the UC can manipulate its admissions criteria merely to favor certain racial and ethnic groups over others, the law would be a paper tiger.

SAT bashing is popular these days. The bashers, however, are not motivated by a desire to improve academic standards; they have something else in mind. In *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, author Nicholas Lemann attempts to portray the SAT as the invention of malevolent forces out to harm minorities. Peter Sacks, author of *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do to Change It*, uses neo-Marxist jargon to describe tests like the SAT as "a highly effective means of social control predominantly serving the interests of the nation's elite" and as a tool for elites to "perpetuate their class privilege with rules of their own making."<sup>20</sup>

The truth is just the opposite. The SAT was developed as a reaction against the WASP elite and its corrupt admissions practices. Unlike earlier standardized tests which tested for mastery of Latin and other subjects taught at exclusive boarding schools, the SAT was a breath of fresh air, emphasizing basic math and language skills.<sup>21</sup> Its developers aimed to make higher education available to talented young people regardless of their background. And they were quite successful. More than one Central Valley farm girl or post office worker's son from Oakland has beaten out a scion of wealth and privilege for a seat at a high-powered university precisely because of the SAT.

Ideologues assert that the SAT is full of sound and fury, but signifies nothing about the likelihood of success in college. This is wishful thinking. Indeed, the arguments used to support the view would make a statistician cringe. Research has repeatedly found a strong correlation between the SAT and student performance.<sup>22</sup> It's not perfect, of course, but nothing is—not high school grades, which are simply the assessments of high school teachers with their own biases, and certainly not subjective assessments of “opportunity” by admissions officers. The bottom line is that the SAT, when used in conjunction with other factors, provides useful information. It is a common yardstick with which students from very different high schools and backgrounds may be compared. Taking it away or replacing it with a more subjective measurement would be a disservice to higher education.

Of course, there are genuine problems—like the availability of commercial coaching courses that give well-heeled students an advantage over others. These courses can indeed modestly improve scores. But the average gain is only 20 to 30 points (combined Math and Verbal), not enough to justify scrapping the test.<sup>23</sup> (For perspective, remember that prior to Proposition 209, UC-San Diego gave the equivalent of 300 SAT points to blacks and Mexican-American applicants in the name of diversity.) Requiring companies to furnish the names of students taking the course so that appropriate adjustments to scores can be made seems the better course of action.

The argument that the test is biased against non-Asian minorities is, however, groundless. SAT scores are obviously subject to huge individual variation. Still, on average, Asians (499V/565M) and whites (528V/530M) score higher than blacks (434V/426M) and Mexican Americans (453V/460M).<sup>24</sup> That's not the same thing as test bias. An admissions test is biased only if it mispredicts how well a given group will do in college once its members are actually enrolled. The problem with the SAT is that it is all too accurate: Asians and whites, on average, substantially outperform African Americans and Mexican Americans not just on the SAT, but in college too.<sup>25</sup> Getting rid of the test would be shooting the messenger.

That does not mean the racial gap is unimportant or undeserving of attention. To the contrary, it is very important. Determining why this gap exists and correcting the problem should be a California priority. Atkinson's proposal, however, only sweeps it under the rug. It patronizingly assumes that most blacks and Mexican Americans can never master the test (and by extension can never excel at the UC) and therefore excuses all students from taking it. By lowering academic standards at the UC generally, it takes the pressure off individual students, their families, their schools, and the entire community at a time when a little pressure is exactly what is needed.

Contrary to media reports, Proposition 209 has made progress in healing the wounds that were created by the racial preference system. In the spring of 1998, the fax machines at UC campuses must have worked late into the night.

They pumped out press releases announcing the composition of their entering freshman classes under the newly-implemented Proposition 209.

These announcements were designed to create the impression of an educational crisis—and they were quite effective in doing so. “Acceptance of Blacks, Latinos to UC Plunges,” one *Los Angeles Times* headline screamed.<sup>26</sup> For a few days, UC’s color-blind admissions policies permeated the national airwaves.

Many of the statements in the press were literally true. According to figures released to the Board of Regents, Berkeley, the UC’s flagship campus, had indeed extended fewer offers to minority applicants for seats in the Class of 2002 than in the previous year. In 1997, 58.6 percent of its freshman admissions went to students who had checked minority boxes—primarily blacks, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. When Proposition 209 went into effect, the figure declined to 48.7 percent. Still, only a bare majority of seats went to whites.

It was also true that most of that decrease was attributable to blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics, who went from 23.1 percent of the total to 10.4 percent. But given that these were the primary groups to benefit from preferences, it was hardly surprising that their numbers would decrease when preferences were removed.

The press directed far less attention to other campuses like UC-Riverside and UC-Santa Cruz, both of which posted impressive gains in minority admissions. At Riverside, for example, black and Latino student admissions shot up by 42 and 31 percent, respectively. Santa Cruz’s increases were less dazzling, but nevertheless notable.

What these figures showed was that the minority students who would have attended Berkeley in the past had not simply vanished. They had been redistributed to other somewhat less highly ranked UC campuses based on their own academic record rather than their skin color. These schools were somewhat less competitive than Berkeley, but nevertheless part of the prestigious UC system, which caters to only the top 12.5 percent of California’s high school graduates. The term “cascading” was coined to describe the phenomenon.

Racial preference advocates use the term derisively, arguing that cascading is a disaster for minority students. The truth is quite the opposite; few changes in educational policy have been better news.

The reason should be obvious, but for some reason is not to many. Despite what affirmative action zealots would have us believe, entering academic credentials matter. Although some students will outperform their entering credentials and some students will underperform theirs, most students will perform in the range that their entering credentials suggest.

For example, according to an internal academic performance report, at UC-San Diego, in the year before 209’s implementation, only one black student had a freshman-year GPA of 3.5 or better—a single black honor student

in a freshman class of 3,268. In contrast, 20 percent of the white students on campus had such a GPA.

Was this because there were no black students capable of doing honors work at UC-San Diego? Of course not. The problem is that such students were at Harvard, Stanford, or Berkeley, where often they were not receiving honors. Nationwide, misguided affirmative action was creating the illusion that few black students could excel.

Proposition 209 has changed that at UC-San Diego, where the performance of black students has now improved dramatically. No longer are black honor students a rarity. Instead, in 1998, a full 20 percent of the black freshmen could boast a GPA of 3.5 or better after their first year. That's higher than the rate for Asians (16 percent) and extremely close to the rate for whites in the same year (22 percent).

UC-San Diego's academic performance experts must have quietly cracked open the champagne. Their report announced that while overall performance has remained static, "underrepresented students admitted to UCSD in 1998 substantially outperformed their 1997 counterparts" and "the majority/minority performance gap observed in past studies was narrowed considerably."

"Narrowed" is understatement. The report found for the first time "no substantial GPA differences based on race/ethnicity." A discreet footnote makes it clear that the report's author knows exactly how this happened: 1998 was the first year of color-blind admissions.

The bottom of the class also changed. Prior to Proposition 209, 15 percent of black students and 17 percent of American Indian students were in academic jeopardy (defined as a GPA of less than 2.0), while only 4 percent of white students were. Many more hovered close to the line. Since UC-San Diego doesn't keep separate statistics for those minority students who need a preference in order to be admitted and those who would have been admitted regardless, it is impossible to say exactly how high the failure rate is for preference beneficiaries in particular. Suffice it to say it is high.

The proof is in the sudden collapse in minority failure rate when racial preferences were eliminated. The difference between racial groups all but evaporated, with the black and American Indian rate falling to 6 percent in 1998. As a consequence, average GPAs stood ready to converge.

Some will argue that UCSD has paid dearly for all this. But the facts suggest otherwise. UCSD had 12 fewer black freshmen in 1998, forced as it was to reject students who did not meet the academic standards of the rest of the class. But it also had 7 fewer black students with a failing GPA at the end of the first year. Meanwhile, those 12 students probably attended a school where their chances of success were greater. It's hard to call that anything but a success.

The UC can throw this tremendous progress away by lowering academic standards generally on its campuses. But it would be a mistake. The SAT is a valuable tool for predicting which students are likely to do best in college.

While it should not be over-emphasized, it should not be under-emphasized either, as Atkinson threatens to do in this politically-inspired plan.

## Notes

1. "Head of U. of California Seeks to End SAT Use in Admissions," *New York Times*, 17 February 2001.
2. "Interview: Richard Atkinson, University of California President," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 February 2001.
3. "California Plan Would Scrap Reliance on SAT; University President Backs more 'Holistic' Approach to Evaluating Applicants to State Campuses," *Washington Post*, 18 February 2001.
4. "California School Suggests Ending Use of SATs," *Chattanooga Times*, 18 February 2001.
5. "School President: Lessen SAT Requirement," *Telegraph-Herald*, 18 February 2001.
6. "University Head Seeks to Drop Benchmark Admissions Test," *International Herald Tribune*, 19 February 2001.
7. See, e.g., Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1999). Lemann's book purports to be an expose on the history of the SAT. A full third of the book, however, is devoted to the history of Proposition 209.
8. California Constitution, Article I, Section 31.
9. See "Testimony of Gail Heriot before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Hearings on H.R. 1909" (The Civil Rights Act of 1997) 26 June 1997, <http://www.house.gov/judiciary/22293.htm>.
10. *Ruos v. Regents of the University of California*, Case No. CV 99-0525 SI (N.D. Cal. filed 2 February 1999); see "Civil Rights Groups Suing Berkeley Over Admissions Policy," *New York Times*, 3 February 1999.
11. "Affirmative Action's End? Now It's Not That Simple," *New York Times*, 24 July 1995.
12. The final version of the guidebook was released in 2000. As a result of the uproar over the draft guidelines, major alterations had been made.
13. The 2001 Robert H. Atwell Distinguished Lecture, delivered at the 83rd Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education, Washington, D.C., 18 February 2001, [http://www.ucop.edu/ucophome/pres/comments/satspch.html#N\\_1](http://www.ucop.edu/ucophome/pres/comments/satspch.html#N_1)
14. Id.
15. See, e.g., "Reward Achievement, Not Aptitude," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 February 2001; and "Looking Beyond the SAT," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 2001.
16. "UC's Backdoor Affirmative Action," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 25 May 2001.
17. Quoted in Marcia Graham Synott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900-1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1979), 108.
18. See generally, Synott, *The Half-Opened Door*.
19. "Clinton Hones Stand on Affirmative Action; Hints at Centrist View That Will Please Neither Side," *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 April 1995.
20. Peter Sacks, *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do to Change It* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2001), 15.
21. Lemann, *The Big Test*.
22. A. Christopher Strenta and Rogers Elliott, "Differential Grading Standards Revisited," *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 24 (1987): 281-91; Rogers Elliott and A. Christopher Strenta, "Effects of Improving the Reliability of the GPA on Prediction Generally and on Comparative Predictions for Gender and Race Particularly," *Journal of Educational Measurement*, 25 (1988): 333-347.
23. Derek C. Briggs, "The Effect of Admissions Test Preparation: Evidence from NELS:88," *Chance*, 14:1 (2001): 10.
24. V. V. Ganeshanathan and Leo Reisberg, "Math Scores Improve on SAT While ACT Scores Remain Stable," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 September 2000, A-68.

25. Indeed, the SAT slightly overpredicts college GPA for blacks, suggesting a slight prediction bias in their favor. See, e.g., Frederick E. Vars and William G. Bowen, "Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores, Race, and Academic Performance in Selective Colleges and Universities," in *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, ed. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998).
26. Kenneth R. Weiss and Mary Curtius, "Acceptance of Blacks, Latinos to UC Plunges," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 April 1998.

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