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UC Reduces Its Low-SAT Acceptances

Critics of past admissions policies hail the change, but university officials say enrollment procedures have not been altered.

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The University of California admitted fewer students with low SAT scores to this year's freshman class than it did in 2003, following criticism that the university was accepting ill-prepared students in a back-door effort to boost enrollment of underrepresented minorities.

Overall, UC campuses in 2004 admitted nearly 2,200 fewer applicants with scores of 1000 or below on the widely used college entrance exam, a drop of 26.6% from the year before, according to a Times analysis of admissions figures. The national and state averages on the exam are about 1020 of a possible 1600.

Critics of the university's past admissions practices found some vindication in the new data. They said the change showed UC had responded to complaints from UC Regent John J. Moores that it was accepting too many students with below-average SAT scores and possibly violating the state's ban on affirmative action.

UC admissions officials, however, said they made no adjustments in admissions as a result of questions raised in 2003 by Moores, who then headed the regents' board.

"Campuses did not change their practices last year in response to that," said Susan Wilbur, UC's systemwide director of admissions. Wilbur also said UC gives SAT scores less weight than it does other factors, including high school grades.

The officials said the decline stemmed from other factors, including better academic preparation among applicants, state budget problems that prompted the university to admit fewer students and a dip in applications for 2004, both overall and among lower-scoring students. The latter accounted for a little more than a third of the drop in admissions of below-average scorers, Times analysis shows.

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Wilbur and others said UC continues to make minor refinements in a controversial entrance policy, first used in 2002, that allows personal factors, including hardship, to be considered alongside grades and test scores for every applicant. They say the policy, styled after those used by many top-tier private colleges, allows a more complete evaluation.

Moore and other critics have questioned whether the policy, known as comprehensive review, has weakened the academic caliber of UC students. Also at issue, they say, is whether the more flexible standards are an attempt to get around the state's 1996 ban on the use of race in hiring or admission at public institutions, including colleges.

UC officials have denied that.

In response to a Times request, UC provided data for two groups of students who applied to its eight undergraduate campuses for fall 2004: those with SAT scores of 1000 or below and those with scores above 1400. The analysis focused on SAT scores in order to compare the data with that for earlier years; Moore, in a 2003 report, used the test scores as his benchmark.

Overall, the 2004 figures show, 51% of applicants with SAT scores of 1000 or below were offered a place by at least one UC campus, compared to 63% the year before.

At the same time, 89% of students with SAT scores above 1400 were accepted, up from 88% than a year earlier. In all, 8,359 such students were admitted in 2004, an increase of about 5% from the previous year.

Still, underlining how competitive UC admissions have become, these high-scoring applicants, in many cases, were rejected by the most selective campuses. At UC Berkeley, for example, 43% of applicants with SAT scores above 1400 were turned down in 2004. In 2003, 48% of such students were denied admission.

Across the UC system, the small shift to admitting more high scorers mainly benefited white and Asian applicants, who together make up more than three-quarters of such applicants.

In contrast, among students with SAT scores of 1000 or below, Latinos were the largest ethnic group applying and accepted. Within that relatively low-scoring group, they also were granted entry by at least one UC at a higher rate than others: 58% of Latinos with lower SATs were accepted, compared with 54% of Asian Americans, 42% of whites and 38% of African Americans. However, the admissions rate for applicants with lower SAT scores dropped for all such ethnic groups from the year before.

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Race Not Considered

UC officials said they do not consider race or ethnicity in admissions decisions, and they attributed the varying acceptance rates to differences in the academic and personal backgrounds of the students.

UC officials, including admissions director Wilbur, said the analysis was limited because it was too focused on the SAT. They also emphasized that because of concerns about its usefulness and fairness, the test has been downplayed in the university's admissions. A revamped SAT was introduced this spring by its owner, the College Board, and will be used in selecting next year's UC freshman class.

Students become eligible for UC admission based on a sliding scale of grade-point averages and scores on standardized tests, including the SAT. These minimum requirements are aimed at identifying a pool equivalent to the top 12.5% of California high school seniors, as envisioned by the state's 1960 master plan for higher education. However, at many UC campuses, students typically must meet much tougher standards.

This year's high school seniors have been learning in recent weeks whether they have been accepted at UC schools. The university will release some information about that group's overall class profile later this month, including racial proportions.

In the UC system, black and Latino students continue to be admitted in numbers far lower than their share of the state's college-age population. Latinos accounted for 34.2% and blacks for 7.3% of the state's graduating high school seniors, according to 2003 figures, the most recent available. But the two groups apply — and are admitted — to UC at only about half those rates.

Latinos made up 15.2% and blacks 3.2%, of UC's admitted fall freshman class in 2004. In contrast, whites represented 37.4% and Asian Americans 32.7% of the admitted class total of 54,306 students for that year.

Moore's ignited debate on the university's admissions process in late 2003, when he released a report showing that the previous year, nearly 400 students with SAT scores of 600 to 1000 were accepted into UC Berkeley's freshman class.

The report also showed that about 3,200 students with SAT scores above 1400 were denied entry to the campus, although the great majority of those with such high scores were accepted.

Moore's did not break down his findings by race or ethnicity. So his report did not directly address concerns raised by former UC Regent Ward Connerly and others that the university might illegally be using the more subjective entry policy to benefit under-qualified black and Latino students.

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A Formal Rebuke

But last March, Moores, writing in Forbes magazine, accused UC of thwarting the affirmative action ban and discriminating against Asian Americans in admissions. He was formally rebuked by the regents.

In the months since, he has rarely attended the board's meetings. The owner of the San Diego Padres baseball team, Moores acknowledged in an interview last week that he now feels less comfortable among fellow regents but remains active on UC issues, especially admissions.

Moores termed "good news" the decline in the numbers of students admitted to UC with below-average SAT scores but also expressed frustration that such applicants continue to get in. UC officials, he said, think such admissions make the university "look better."

But he said university leaders "are victimizing these kids by admitting them with low scores ... and UC should not be in the business of providing remedial education."

Connerly said Moores deserved credit for the changes evident in the admissions figures.

"We were on a path last year to really bringing the university to mediocrity," said Connerly, who recently left the board. "And John, whether they admit it or not, had the effect of putting a spotlight on that and forcing the university to reconsider the trajectory we were on."

Even before the controversy, UC's two most selective campuses, UC Berkeley and UCLA, rejected more than nine out of 10 applicants with SATs of 1000 or below. Last year, however, they clamped down further.

At UCLA, for instance, only 3% of such applicants were invited to join the current freshman class, compared with 6% a year earlier. As a result, UCLA admitted 191 of these students, down from the total of 350 accepted the previous year.

At UC Berkeley, about 6% of lower-scoring applicants were admitted, down from 8% the year before. The campus offered admission to 216 students with SATs of 1000 or below, down from 313 in 2003.

Many college advisors at California high schools said they sense that the more selective UC campuses have modified their admissions practices since the Moores report. Yet they offer sharply divided views on the effect on students.

Some college advisors said UC campuses appear to be putting a higher priority on scores from SAT tests and SAT II subject exams. Others said they sense more focus on applicants' extracurricular activities, the rigor of course loads and hardships they may have faced, including poverty.

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Brother John Montgomery, principal of Cathedral High School near downtown Los Angeles, which has a largely low-income enrollment, said UC admissions practices have improved. He said comprehensive review, by taking into account economic disadvantages, "benefits my school. These students have overcome obstacles."

Montgomery said that five seniors at his Catholic boys' school were recently accepted by UCLA and five were turned down. He said only one of the successful applicants scored less than 1000 on the SAT and that all have taken Advanced Placement classes, earn high grades and participate in sports or other extracurricular activities.

At some public schools with large low-income enrollments, however, college counselors said UC's admissions decisions often seem unpredictable, and they questioned whether their students receive a fair chance if they don't earn high SAT scores. Loretta Hultman, a college counselor for Roosevelt High School in Boyle Heights, noted that one of her top students last year scored 1090 on the entrance exam, slightly above average. The student was accepted by Brown University in the Ivy League and by UC Berkeley but was turned down by UCLA.

"Brown saw the promise. Berkeley saw the promise. I don't know what happened with UCLA," Hultman said.



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Raising the Bar

For the current freshman class, UC campuses last year accepted 26.6% fewer students with SAT scores of 1000 or below than they did in 2003. Among college-bound California students who graduated from high school in 2004, the average SAT score was 1020, and 48% scored 1000 or below.

Low-SAT students admitted*:

	2003	2004	Percent Decrease	Number Decrease
All	8,139	5,975	-26.6%	-2164
Latinos	3,259	2,606	-20.0%	-653
Asians	2,380	1,771	-25.6%	-609
Whites	1,222	708	-42.1%	-514
Blacks	665	457	-31.3%	-208
All low-SAT applicants**	13,012	11,610	-10.8%	-1402

High SAT students admitted*:

But UC accepted 5.1% more students with SATs exceeding 1400 in 2004 than in 2003. Among college-bound California students who graduated from high school in 2004, only 3.9% scored that well.

* Includes students accepted by at least one UC campus.

** Includes all applicants with SAT scores of 1000 or below.

	2003	2004	Percent Increase	Number Increase
All	7,956	8,359	5.1%	403
Latinos	3,263	3,424	4.9%	161
Asians	3,045	3,185	4.6%	140
Whites	290	311	7.2%	21
Blacks	61	73	19.7%	12
All high-SAT applicants***	8,998	9,376	4.2%	378

*** Includes all applicants with SAT scores between 1400 and a perfect 1600.

Sources: University of California College Board, Los Angeles Times analysis
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