



The University of California Should Drop Standardized Testing in Admissions to Ensure More Talented Students Can Access the System

The University of California (UC) is the state's premier research institution. The nine undergraduate campuses, serving 260,000 students, are integral in conferring bachelor's degrees to California students. The UC is essential to helping the state meet workforce demand and sustain the overall economy.

California is facing a looming shortage of college-educated workers. That shortage is compounded by persistent racial equity gaps in degree attainment. California cannot meet the demand for more educated workers without increasing access and success for Latinx, Black, Native American, and Asian subgroups of students.

Key to the UC's mission is to *"enroll a student body that, beyond meeting eligibility requirements, encompasses the broad diversity of cultural, racial, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds characteristic of California."* But today, Latinx, Black or Native American students only occupy 1 in 4 seats at the UC, despite representing nearly 60% of the state's high school graduates. This is a reflection of our state's failure to provide adequate resources and dismantle policies that keep out talented, qualified underrepresented students.

The UC has not done a sufficient job to ensure an equitable admissions process. While there have been efforts to admit and enroll underrepresented students, the UC has yet to remove one of the major first barriers a Latinx, Black, Native American, or Asian American Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) applicant faces: standardized testing requirements.

Removing the unnecessary and racially stratifying barrier of standardized tests in UC admission requirements is a critical strategy for our state's future economic health, and an anti-racist policy solution for our state's future scholars.

Why Are Standardized Tests Harmful to Latinx, Black, Native American, and AANHPI Students?

1. *The SAT and ACT Predict Privilege, Not Aptitude*

For decades, standardized testing corporations have marketed the SAT and ACT as "objective" measures of a student's ability to be successful in undergraduate work. The UC system began using the tests in 1968 as a "means of reducing the size of the pool [of eligible students as required by the CA Master Plan for Higher Education]."¹ The challenge with these scores, however, is that they are *no more powerful* at predicting a student's undergraduate performance than High School Grade Point Average (HSGPA), but they *do strongly correlate* with a student's familial resources and race. Standardized test scores do not offer an "objective" measure, nor do they enhance an application.

Multiple national and UC-based studies have found that an applicant's overall high school performance, as represented by HSGPA, is more closely correlated with one's undergraduate performance than standardized test scores. A recent report from the UC Academic Senate's February 2020 Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF) Report found that HSGPA and test scores equally predict a student's undergraduate GPA and graduation rate. A 2019 analysis from Allensworth and Clark in [Educational Researcher](#) found that HSGPA is five times more likely to

¹ Discussion Item "College Entrance Exam Use in University of California Admissions" for the UC Regents for March 19, 2020.

predict college graduation than ACT scores. In [2007, Geiser and Santelices](#) found HSGPA was consistently a stronger predictor of outcomes across all academic disciplines, campuses and cohorts across the UC system, and that tests had an adverse on disadvantaged, Latinx, Black and Native American students. Standardized tests, originally intended as an objective indicator of student aptitude, do not predict student success and should not be considered an essential or supplemental element of an eligible student's application.

Instead of measuring “aptitude,” the tests actually measure how much opportunity a student has been afforded. Research shows standardized test scores are strongly connected to a student's access to family resources; placing a premium on standardized tests further privileges well-resourced, predominantly white students in admissions processes. Students from [wealthy families](#) can afford more test preparation (ranging from \$250-\$1,500 for a course), tutoring (starting at \$100 per hour), and other costly experiences that improve scores (such as taking the test multiple times). A [2016 study](#) across 15 years of UC applicant data found demographic factors account for 39% of differences in test scores. These scores are a proxy for access to resources, not a young scholar's potential.

Not only do these scores predict wealth and privilege, but the current weight of these scores may dissuade a student from even applying to a UC. College counselors and high school students know the importance schools place on test scores; this knowledge likely causes many Latinx, Black, Native American, and AANHPI students to opt out of applying. For example, the average composite SAT score for UC Berkeley students is between 1,340 and 1,540; at Davis, it is between 1,230 and 1,490. A perfect score is 1,600. When looking at average scores by race, a [2018 study](#) found that the national average SAT score for Black students was 117 points lower than the average for white students. Another study by [Reeves and Halikias](#) examined 2015 SAT percentile ranks and found that 60% and 33% of the top test takers were Asian and white, while only 5% and 2% were Latinx and Black, respectively

Many students in lower income districts may not have the resources to pay to take the test, nor the access to a counselor who can support with potential fee waivers. With a test that has little value in predicting success in college, why would the UC continue to place this barrier before applicants?

2. The UC System cannot use race as a factor in admissions decisions, yet campuses rely on standardized tests that are a proxy for race and privilege.

Standardized tests give privileged students a leg up in admissions. This leg up is compounded by two realities of systemic racism in California: the elimination of affirmative action via Proposition 209 and the historic and persistent racial inequities of our K-12 system. If the UC system cannot use race as an affirmative factor in admissions, it cannot continue to use test scores, a clear proxy for race and privilege, that have a negative impact by race/ethnicity in its decisions either.

Since the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996, California's university systems have not been able to use race as a consideration in admissions processes. With this context, the UC has developed a variety of approaches to increase campus diversity without using race, including an Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) policy and holistic review. These efforts have had some success, however, a [2019 study](#) by Dr. Zachary Bleemer from the UC Office of the President found that while **affirmative action policies had increased underrepresented group representation by 12%, holistic review and ELC only increase representation by 6% and 3.5%, respectively.** These findings are echoed across the country, with a [2020 study](#) finding “that the elimination of affirmative action has led to persistent declines in the share of underrepresented minorities.”

There are many factors that contribute to underrepresentation at the UC system, both at the K-12 and UC admissions level. Historic and increasing segregation in CA's K-12 system has resulted in inequitable access to a-g courses, extra curriculars, and college counseling support. Current admissions practices of holistic review and ELC are not strong enough policies on their own to account for systemic racism and underinvestment.

The holistic review process is utilized differently across UC's campuses. Pro-test advocates in the UC claim holistic review, comprised of up to 14 factors, reduces the importance of the test in admissions decisions. This minimization is contradictory--if a test's weight is diminished in the application process, why even require it? Moreover, individual campuses weight the 14 factors of holistic review differently; some campuses only use HSGPA and test scores to determine their freshman classes, while others prioritize HSGPA and essay responses, for example. Even on a less test-reliant campus, the scores are still visible to readers and could implicitly affect an applicant's overall score. The use of test scores in admissions is an indirect way of perpetuating racial inequities and underrepresentation, despite safeguarding attempts.

The UC Has an Unprecedented Opportunity to Be a Leader in Defining an Antiracist Admissions Policy

As the world's premier public research institution, the UC and President Napolitano can forge a path for the country to put an end to an inherently racist admission policy. The UC already has a holistic review process that could be coupled with HSGPA to create an equitable admissions process that does not place a premium on flawed standardized tests. Already, the California's Community Colleges and the California State University system have ended reliance on flawed high stakes standardized tests for placement purposes in favor of examining a student's full high school academic record.

Over 1,000 Campuses and Graduate Universities Are Test-Optional or Test-Blind, and many have seen an increase in diversity, with no impact on retention or graduation rates. In a [2018 study](#) of almost 100,000 applicants across 28 colleges found that test-optional admissions policies precipitated increased numbers of Black and Latinx students being accepted; **these students graduated at equivalent of higher rates than their test-submitting peers**. The research is showing that removing the barrier of standardized test requirements is opening up colleges and universities to a more racially diverse class that is smart, talented and highly capable. California and the UC system cannot afford to keep passing up talented, qualified low-income, first generation, Black, Latinx, and Native American students.

In the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, the UC Regents made the right choice to not require standardized tests for Fall 2021 applicants. This is a student-centered approach to policy. But this approach cannot be only for an unprecedented event that affects all potential applicants, both privileged and underrepresented. With this decision, the UC will demonstrate they are capable to evaluating an applicant's potential without the use of tests.

Policy Recommendations: Antiracist Admissions at UC

The Campaign for College Opportunity and our allies are calling on the UC President and Regents to reject the Task Force recommendation to rely on standardized test scores in eligibility and admissions decisions for nine more years. We recommend immediate action is taken to:

1. *Eliminate the required use of the ACT and SAT in admissions.* The Regents should seek independent analysis and consultation to develop an alternative anti-racist and equitable admissions policy moving forward that does not include the use of standardized tests;
2. Utilize the Fall 2021 admissions cycle that, due to COVID-19, no longer includes consideration of standardized tests, as a pilot year to *evaluate how the use of new admission criteria impacts the composition and success of the entering class*. Utilize the findings to launch a new admission process that does not rely on standardized tests for the Fall 2022 admissions cycle.
3. *Seek out new ways to ensure racial equity in UC admissions* that could include expanded use of holistic review, expansion of eligibility in the local context, admissions for the top 9% of each high school class

across the nine UC campuses (not just UC Merced), removal of enrollment barriers for admitted Latinx, Black, Native American and subgroups of Asian students, and enrollment growth to meet the growing demand for a UC education.

How Equity Champions Can Get Involved

Eliminating reliance on standardized tests in the UC system is an important step in equity-based, antiracist policy, however, the testing industry has formidable sway within higher education. To match this influence, the Campaign invites our partners to engage in the following ways:

1. *Sign our coalition letter:* Add your organization's name to our coalition letter [through this form](#). The letter will be presented to Regents and UC leaders throughout our campaign.
2. *Submit public comment at the UC Regents meeting on May 19-21:* Contact Linda Vazquez, Senior Public Affairs Director at Linda@collegecampaign.org for the most up to date information on the agenda items at times.
3. *Post on social media using our [Social Media Toolkit](#).*

Additional Resources

The Task Force Report can be found [here](#). An addendum released by six members of the Task Force, refuting its main recommendations, can be found [here](#).

Other studies not directly referenced in the above materials:

- [Geiser, "SAT/ACT Scores, High-School GPA, and the problem of Omitted Variable Bias: Why the UC Taskforce's Findings are Spurious," 2020](#)
- [Geiser, "The Growing Correlation Between Race and SAT Scores: New Findings from California," 2015](#)
- [Geiser, "A Proposal to Eliminate the SAT in Berkeley Admissions," 2017](#)
- [Jaschik, Making the Case for Test Optional, *Inside Higher Education*, 2018](#)
- [Kurlaender and Cohen, "Predicting College Success: How Do Different High School Assessments Measure Up?," 2019](#)
- [Reeves and Halikias, "Race Gaps in SAT scores highlight inequality and hinder upward mobility," *Brookings Institute*, 2017](#)

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