

March 17, 2020

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President Janet Napolitano
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RE: Ending Reliance on Standardized Tests to Accelerate Equity in UC Admissions

Dear Chair Perez, Vice Chair Estolano, and President Napolitano:

The undersigned educational equity, civil rights organizations, and K-12 organizations and leaders urge you to take the historic and bold step to eliminate the University of California's (UC) reliance on standardized tests in eligibility and admission decisions. This change would further align UC practices with its mission of enrolling students that reflect the diversity of the state.

For decades, eligibility and admissions policies requiring standardized tests have given affluent, overrepresented students preferential treatment in college access. The use of standardized tests in current admissions policies yield more wealthy and white freshman cohorts. While those privileged students fill the coveted, at-capacity seats across the UC campuses, highly capable, low-income, Black, Latinx, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander (AANAPI), and other historically underserved and underrepresented students are too often denied access to our state's premier research institutions.

We applaud President Janet Napolitano for her charge to the Task Force to examine whether the UC and its students are best served by the current use of standardized testing in admission decisions. At a time when California continues to be plagued by wide racial/ethnic gaps in admission, enrollment and success at public four-year universities, our higher education systems must ensure that policies do not unfairly discriminate against low-income students or students who are Latinx, Black, Native American, AANAPI, or from other minoritized communities.

While we oppose the Task Force recommendation to continue use of standardized testing for the next nine years, we do support the recommendations to expand Eligibility in the Local Context, review new ways the UC could improve equity in admissions, and increase student academic supports.

We 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. If California prohibits the affirmative use of race in admissions, it should follow that the discriminatory use of race in admissions should also be prohibited.

Our collective of equity-focused and community-based organizations recommend that you take action to:

1. *Eliminate reliance on the ACT and SAT in admissions within two to three years.* The Regents should seek independent analysis and consultation to develop an alternative anti-racist and equitable admissions policy moving forward;

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2. *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), and enrollment growth to meet the growing demand for a UC education.

We have based these recommendations on a large body of research from both the UC system and the national context.

1. *Standardized tests do not predict a student's undergraduate success.* In fact, a student's high school grade point average (HSGPA) is an equal if not stronger indication of how well a student will fare in their undergraduate career. Given that standardized test scores are a weaker measure for undergraduate success, why require high school students (and recently, entire K-12 districts) to spend precious time and resources on these tests?

The Task Force Report acknowledges that while standardized tests have some validity in predicting first-year GPA, the tests do not predict cumulative GPA or overall success in college. Numerous other reports from the two last decades have corroborated this finding. For example, a [2017 report from Geiser](#) found that within the context of holistic reviews, standardized test scores account for less than two percent variance of student performance. A [2007 report from Geier and Santelices](#) found across all academic disciplines, campuses and cohorts in the UC system, HSGPA is a stronger predictor of outcomes and that it has a less adverse impact than tests on disadvantaged and URM students.

The University of California should not continue to rely on test scores that have little predictive power on college applicant potential or success and that simply feeds a multi-billion dollar testing industry in the U.S.

2. *Standardized tests are closely linked to a student's family income, education level, and racial background;* placing a premium on the ACT and SAT in eligibility and admissions processes inherently privileges well-resourced, predominantly white students. Students from wealthy families can afford more test preparation, tutoring and other extracurricular activities and experiences that improve scores on both the SAT and ACT. Instead of measuring "aptitude," the tests actually measure how much opportunity a student has been afforded rather than the potential of a student. The relationship of family background to test scores has, in fact, [increased over the past 25 years](#).

The adverse effects of using the tests are evident when you consider that nearly 60% of California high school graduates are Latinx, Black or Native American but only make up a quarter of admitted freshmen to the UC. We are deeply concerned that thousands of Black, Latinx, AANAPI, and Native American students are filtered out with the blunt instrument of test scores before they are afforded holistic review.

3. *The UC can make history and set an example for the nation by doing the hard work of identifying more equitable admissions criteria.* 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 racist admissions policies. The UC already has a holistic review process that could be coupled with HSGPA to create a more 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.
4. *Nationally, over 1,000 campuses and graduate universities are test-optional or test-blind.* Importantly, many of these schools have seen an increase in diversity, with no impact on retention or graduation rates.

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These campuses, as well as the whole University of Texas system, have proven that high school GPA and a more comprehensive review of a student’s profile will yield a more diverse class with increased student success.

5. *The Task Force Report illuminates clear divisions in values, research, and conclusions.* While the report identifies multiple outcomes that are important for accountability, its analyses focus heavily on the relationship between test scores and first year grades while minimizing the importance of cumulative undergraduate GPA and graduation rates.

Further, some of the tables in Appendix I do not control for low socio-economic status (SES). This demographic is commonly controlled for in studies because of its proven impact on student outcomes. By not controlling for low SES, the study inflates and inaccurately portrays standardized test’s ability to determine undergraduate outcomes.

Of great concern to us, and evidence of a lack of consensus by UC faculty appointed to the Task Force, is what was written in a separately released addendum. Written and signed by six prominent Task Force members, the addendum expresses concern over the discriminatory effects of standardized tests and recommends eliminating consideration of test scores in admissions in a much shorter timeframe than the nine years. We agree with that recommendation.

It has been twenty-five years since the passage of Proposition 209, the California ballot measure that banned the use of race in university admission decisions. Since then, the UC has been employing “race neutral” strategies to increase the racial/ethnic diversity of its student body. Unfortunately, these efforts – Comprehensive/Holistic Review and Eligibility in the Local Context – have not had the level of impact that affirmative action had on diversifying the UC student body. Eliminating the use of racially-biased standardized tests is a significant way UC can remove barriers that keep Black, Latinx, AANAPI, and Native American students with as much talent and potential as others, out of the UC.

We are looking to you, the leaders of the University of California to take the bold step of defining a more equitable admissions process that does not rely on the use of standardized test and has the potential to change the landscape for college admissions across the country. Our students are counting on you.

Sincerely

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CC: Maria Anguiano, Chair of the Academic and Student Affairs Committee, University of California Regents, University of California
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