

Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE:

ACTION ITEM

For Meeting of July 12, 2017

ESTABLISHMENT OF POLICY ON AUGMENTED REVIEW IN UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regents Policy 2104: Policy on Comprehensive Review in Undergraduate Admissions, adopted in 2001, calls for campuses to “institute a comprehensive review process by which students applying to UC campuses are evaluated for admission using multiple measures of achievement and promise while considering the context in which each student has demonstrated academic accomplishment.” The Academic Senate provides annual reports to the Board concerning comprehensive review.¹ A total of 14 separate categories form the overall record for review of applicants to UC, including both quantitative and qualitative criteria. The breadth and depth of information obtained from UC’s systemwide application for undergraduate admission provides campus admissions staff and professionally trained application readers with the qualitative and quantitative information necessary to assess applicants’ readiness and qualifications for admission. Experience has shown that requesting supplementary information from a small proportion of applicants can be helpful in assessing a student’s qualifications for admission and in fulfilling Regents Policy 2108: Resolution Regarding Individualized Review and Holistic Evaluation in Undergraduate Admissions, which “direct[s] the President, in consultation with the Academic Senate and campus admission professionals, to ensure that all applicants receive an individualized review that ensures trained readers examine applicants’ full files to evaluate their accomplishments in the context of opportunity.” The evaluation of an applicant’s qualifications using additional materials is known as *augmented/supplemental review*.

The proposed Policy on Augmented Review establishes guidelines and criteria for the use of supplemental information, including letters of recommendation, in undergraduate admissions on

¹ The most recent version of the “[GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSITY POLICY ON UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS](#)” can be found on the Senate’s web site.

UC campuses. Augmented review has proved to be helpful when specific gaps are present in the application, and some campuses have developed procedures to guide such reviews.² The policy proposed here takes account of these campus best practices and is designed to advance Regents Policy 2102 to craft a student body that demonstrates high academic achievement and represents the broad cultural, racial, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity of California.

The proposed policy guides the collection of supplementary information, based on the experiences of campuses that have used such information, including certain “best practices” concerning letters of recommendation. Adoption as systemwide policy ensures broad consistency across the nine undergraduate campuses, while allowing flexibility in the supplementary information requested for any particular applicant. Regents’ adoption of the policy is consistent with the Board’s authority over admissions policies recommended by the Academic Senate, as provided for in Bylaw 40.1, and serves the University’s obligation to the public to make all aspects of admissions both transparent and easily understood.

Specifically, the proposed policy outlines three types of supplemental information a campus may request from up to 15 percent of applicants in an augmented review: 1) a questionnaire inviting the applicant to elaborate on special talents, accomplishments, extraordinary circumstances, and/or their school/home environment; 2) first semester grades in the senior year; and 3) up to two letters of recommendation. The proposed policy states that campuses may solicit letters of recommendation only from applicants selected for augmented review, applicants considered for admission by exception, and/or applicants given a special review in other specific situations such as athletic admissions.

It is important to stress that almost all applications to UC are complete as submitted and provide a clear indication of the applicant’s qualifications, without the additional information that an augmented review would provide. The proposed policy requires that such reviews occur only for applicants for whom the information already provided is insufficient to be dispositive for the admissions decision. As experience accumulates, information most often found to be missing should suggest improvements to the systemwide UC application common to all nine undergraduate campuses, in order to prompt applicants to address those areas more thoroughly and without the need for an augmented review. The cap is set, however, so that there is little chance of a campus exceeding the proportion of applicants from whom it may desire to solicit additional information.

The proposed policy would be effective for the fall 2018-19 admissions cycle.

² Since Comprehensive Review was first implemented, the Academic Senate’s Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) has provided campuses with the flexibility to “create admissions policies and practices that, while consistent with University-wide criteria and policies, are also sensitive to local campus values and academic priorities.” (GUIDELINES, p. 3) In response, several campuses developed practices to request supplementary information from a small number of applicants, consistent with Regents Policy 2108, ensuring that “all applicants receive an individualized review.”

RECOMMENDATION

~~The Assembly of the Academic Senate, in accordance with Regents Bylaw 40.1 delegating authority to the Academic Senate to determine the conditions for admissions, subject to the approval of the Board,~~The President of the University endorses the Assembly of the Academic Senate's recommendation that the Academic and Student Affairs Committee recommends that the Regents adopt the Policy on Augmented Review in Undergraduate Admissions, as shown in Attachment 1.

BACKGROUND

The proposed policy responds to President Napolitano's September 2016 request to the Academic Senate for a systemwide policy that is uniform across UC campuses on the use of letters of recommendation in undergraduate admissions. The Academic Council delegated the task of developing the policy to the Academic Senate's Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS). As suggested by President Napolitano, and motivated by concern that no groups be unintentionally disadvantaged by admissions policy, the University Committee on Affirmative Action, Diversity, and Equity also provided advice. This new policy was approved by an 8-4 vote by BOARS on May 17, 2017, a 16-2 vote by the Academic Council on May 24, 2017, and a 28-10 vote by the Assembly of the Academic Senate on June 14, 2017.

It is important to emphasize that Augmented Review involves supplementary information, with letters representing one type of information. There has been widespread support and no controversy over Augmented Review, nor about asking the applicant for more information, such as grades from the first semester of the senior year. Letters of recommendation have been the subject of concerns over fairness, but BOARS felt that Augmented Review should continue to allow flexibility over how additional information is obtained. The guiding principle is that additional information should be requested only when it is needed. Senior-year grades and student-provided information do not raise concerns over fairness or bias, so this background focuses on letters of recommendation. The proposed policy would allow them within Augmented Review and certain other cases where they have been the longstanding practice, and would not allow them otherwise.

The President's request was prompted by a process that began with a 2015 proposal from the Berkeley campus to seek letters of recommendation from all applicants, as part of a pilot study comprising several changes to admissions procedures.³ The campus felt that it needed letters from all applicants to help make finer distinctions among the most highly qualified applicants. The Berkeley proposal raised concerns in the Office of the President and the Academic Senate that allowing one campus to require letters of recommendation as a condition of admission would be inconsistent with the principle of a single, uniform undergraduate admissions policy for

³ Along with requesting letters of recommendation for many applicants, the campus introduced several modifications to the evaluation process, including replacing its five-point system for ranking applicants with three categories – Yes, No, and Possible; expanding the use of the waitlist instead of making earlier decisions to admit or deny some applicants; and adding a third read by faculty for some applicants.

the University. It also raised more general questions and concerns about the role of letters of recommendation in the admissions process and the extent to which a letters requirement could be a barrier disadvantaging vulnerable student populations.

In July 2015, as a response to the Berkeley proposal, the Academic Council endorsed a one-year pilot study allowing the campus to invite letters of recommendation from those applicants ranked as “possible” admits. The pilot was put in place for fall 2016 admissions. After the first year, both BOARS and the Academic Council considered preliminary results. The Academic Council felt that the pilot should continue but without the option to invite letters, while BOARS felt that the full pilot study should continue unchanged for another year. Berkeley went forward with the full pilot for a second year and continues to study admissions results, as does BOARS. President Napolitano made her request for a systemwide policy in fall 2016 at the outset of the second year of the pilot.

Some UC faculty, administrators, and Regents have raised concerns about the extent to which letters conflict with UC principles of access and fairness by further disadvantaging already disadvantaged populations. These concerns center on the view that students attending under-resourced high schools, first-generation students, or students from disadvantaged backgrounds will find it more difficult to obtain high-quality letters, or may even decide not to apply to a campus expecting letters. In contrast, students who attend well-resourced high schools with access to experienced letter-writers will be further advantaged. Concerns were also expressed about the burden that the widespread use of letters would impose on high-school counselors, teachers, and others, particularly those at lower-resourced public schools.

Based on these concerns, during the discussions of the proposed policy, BOARS decided against recommending a systemwide policy that would require letters from all applicants to all UC campuses. The committee developed the proposed augmented review as an alternative approach that allows letters and other specified sources of additional information on a limited and prescribed basis.

The proposed policy outlines criteria for an additional review of applicants who fall in the margins for admission, but whose initial application presents a specific gap in the picture of their qualifications or presents extraordinary circumstances that call for further comment. It is framed from the perspective that a letter of recommendation is meant to convey *additional information* about an applicant and that, if a professionally trained reader has identified an area in which more information is desirable, campuses should attempt to obtain that information. Similarly, if the reader feels a decision can be made without additional information, then a letter or other specified additional information should not be requested. The proposed policy requires a first read of an application by a professionally trained reader and a finding that specific information is lacking in the application before a letter or other specified additional material is requested. It provides detailed guidance to campuses but includes flexible parameters for implementing local processes to address a specific information gap in the application. *This balance is the basis for embedding a policy about letters of recommendation within a policy on augmented review: it is good policy to seek additional information when it is needed.*

In addition, the proposed policy is consistent with research supporting the benefits of multiple letters of recommendation in a standardized format and the usefulness of information in the later high school years, such as seventh semester grades (i.e., first semester of the senior year), in forecasting college success. Campuses that elect to invite letters of recommendation within the context of an augmented review could, for instance, provide specific prompts that directly target the information requested, which seems preferable to an open-ended request for a letter of recommendation. Such prompts should mitigate the potential for disadvantaging any student as a result of their limited access to or ability to identify a person who could write a high-quality letter.

Finally, the proposed policy is consistent with the President’s request for a policy that maintains common application and admissions requirements across the nine UC undergraduate campuses. As noted and if necessary, BOARS will recommend revisions to admissions procedures—and perhaps Regents policy—as experience accumulates. That experience will include continued analysis of all application results, including those under augmented review, as well as results from the Berkeley campus pertaining to the pilot study.

The admissions process is dynamic and ever-changing; ongoing efforts to expand the applicant pool and obtain all information relevant for assessing applicants’ qualifications are just two aspects of the evolving nature of the admissions process. Accordingly, BOARS has indicated that, as with other Regents policies, the committee views the proposed Augmented Review Policy as a starting point that it can and should revisit if relevant new information comes to light. BOARS and the Academic Senate remain committed to studying admissions results across all campuses to obtain a deeper understanding of the implications of the proposed Augmented Review Policy, and the role that letters or other supplemental information can play in the admissions process. BOARS plans to add “Experience under Augmented Review” to its ongoing reports to the Regents.

Key to Acronyms

BOARS	Academic Senate’s Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools
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Attachment: [Policy on Augmented Review in Undergraduate Admissions](#)