



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
1111 Franklin Street, 11th Floor  
Oakland, California 94607-5200

December 16, 2020

University of California President Drake

**RE: Feasibility of a new UC admissions test**

Dear President Drake,

On behalf of the Feasibility Study Steering Committee (FSSC), we respectfully submit a recommendation on the viability of a new UC test for use in freshman admissions in accordance with the Regents' action of May 21, 2020.

The FSSC was charged with identifying “the high-level purpose and goal of a UC freshman admissions test to guide the work of the Feasibility Study Work Group.” The steering committee was asked to “(D)eliberate the work group’s findings and recommendation and develop a recommendation to the UC President to (1) pursue a new standardized test for use in UC freshman admissions and selection or (2) eliminate standardized testing as a requirement at UC beginning with fall 2025 admissions.”

After careful deliberation, based on deep consideration of the report of the Feasibility Study Work Group (FSWG), the FSSC has determined that (1) it is potentially feasible to include an existing test as an additional data point for admissions purposes; and (2) it is not feasible to develop a new test, particularly within the required time frame. As such, we propose that the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SB) be further studied and evaluated, especially with respect to disparity reduction concerns, and that it be considered for use in a manner that is different from the previous high-stakes use of the SAT or ACT.

In closing, the FSSC co-chairs would like to recognize the contributions of the steering committee members, who dedicated their expertise to deliberate an issue for UC admissions that could have an impact on educational equity in California for years to come. The co-chairs also express deep gratitude to the FSWG members, who devoted their invaluable expertise and countless precious hours to this effort. They actively approached the process with a deep sense of responsibility, creativity and open minds.

Respectfully,

Michael Brown  
Provost and  
Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

Mary Gauvain  
Chair, Academic Senate

## Recommendation of the Feasibility Study Steering Committee to UC President Drake

After careful deliberation and based on deep consideration of the report of the Feasibility Study Work Group (FSWG), attached, **the Feasibility Study Steering Committee (FSSC) has determined that it is neither feasible nor desirable to create or develop a new test to take the place of the SAT or ACT in UC admissions.**

Throughout FSSC discussions, deliberators debated over the utilization of the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SB) as a *potential solution*, perhaps with modifications, to add an additional data point to the other sources of evidence utilized for admissions purposes. SB is required of all public school students in California in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and in 15 other states or territories across the United States; the Steering Committee hastens to note concerns around avoiding high-stakes testing contexts (explained below). As described below, **we propose that the Smarter Balanced Assessment (SB) be further studied and evaluated and that it be considered for use in a manner that is different from the previous high-stakes use of the SAT or ACT.**

The SB has several features that render it worth further interrogation and consideration as a source of admissions data for a state university system that has already predicated part of its admissions decisions on course requirements that have been incorporated in the state's K–12 curriculum system in ways that are intended to leverage stronger learning for students before they enter college (viz., A-G course requirements). First, SB assesses the Common Core curriculum adopted in California, which the Board of Admissions and Relations to Schools (BOARS), of UC's Academic Senate, has also integrated into California's A-G course requirements. In addition, SB is criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced: It is designed to measure curriculum-based knowledge and skills (like Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate tests are designed to do) rather than to create a normal curve that ranks students against each other, benchmarked against a norming group that represents the most advantaged students. Furthermore, the SB was designed to represent higher-order thinking and performance skills as well as open-ended performance tasks in English language arts and mathematics that require research, inquiry, writing and problem-solving of the kind required in college.

For these reasons, the FSSC believes that the SB may provide a tool that affords more students from diverse backgrounds important opportunities to show what they know and can do.

### The Importance of Lessening the “Stakes”

Both the FSSC and the FSWG expressed strong passion and commitment to avoid having any new test become a high-stakes test like the SAT and the ACT. The FSSC understands, as does the FSWG, that “high-stakes” testing has educationally distorting effects, effects that also have negative psychological and equity impacts. That is, when test scores are overly relied upon to make important decisions about students (or their teachers, their schools/districts, etc.), a range of threats and anxiety result. Moreover, educationally inappropriate (even illegal) behaviors can result from efforts to increase a student's status on the test. To the contrary, “low-stakes” testing

better supports proper educational behaviors, academic achievement, school improvement and the associated policies and practices. A potential low-stakes benefit of the SB is that many California public students have had familiarity with it since the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; students take it in their local schools with their classmates, and the test is administered by familiar school personnel. The FSSC believes that more can, and should, be done to lessen the stakes associated with testing.

The FSSC recommends that the University consider multiple and diverse means of lowering the stakes associated with the future use of tests in admissions; for example, we recommend that the President, in collaboration with the Academic Senate, consider:

- Allowing, *instead of requiring*, students to submit their SB scores as one data point in the comprehensive review process, similar to the voluntary submission of AP and IB scores. The use of these scores in comprehensive review is not a requirement. They reflect an accomplishment that students can point to that describes their engagement with a curriculum. Some concerns about this were raised, and careful oversight would be required.
- Using the SB score as one of many possible data points in holistic review, rather than as fixed or heavily-weighted elements of admissions formulas.
- Exploring whether multiple testing opportunities would help avoid allowing a single test administered on a single day during the junior year from becoming a high-stakes situation, while also better achieving the desired goals of providing student performance feedback and improvement opportunities. For example, multiple test-taking opportunities of the SB, perhaps as both a junior-year and a senior-year assessment, might not only lower the stakes associated with the current test, but also better achieve the goals of student performance feedback and improvement.

## **Accessibility**

Our recommendation of including SB scores as one of many factors in comprehensive review is intended to provide students with an additional, educationally appropriate opportunity to showcase their strengths. In contrast to the “traditional” way of using standardized test scores as an artificial comparison of academic qualities among students, we advocate for a paradigm shift where UC applies an equity lens to these traditional considerations. Under the Organic Act of 1868, which gave birth to the University of California, the Regents of the University of California have an affirmative duty, “according to population, to so apportion the representation of students, when necessary, that all portions of the State shall enjoy equal privilege therein.” It is reasonable that the university provide more, not fewer, opportunities for different populations of students, especially California students, to demonstrate their capabilities of succeeding at the university.

We therefore recommend that the President, in collaboration with the Academic Senate, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), the State Board of Education (SBE) and the California Department of Education (CDE), examine:

- Whether other students (e.g., California private school and homeschooled students, students outside of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) may take the SB.
- If there are other assessments analogous to the SB that other students, in or out of state, can submit for consideration under holistic review.
- Whether there are other methods that are, perhaps, less subject to “high-stakes” effects and consequences that would serve similar purposes without the costs associated with standardized testing.

### **More Information is Needed**

- To what extent does the test fill information gaps in an applicant’s file without introducing additional inequities?
- A test score is a single-day snapshot of students’ abilities, yet it does not, in and of itself, provide a complete picture of students’ potential. How can we ensure that this single data point is not over-privileged in the admissions process?

By expanding upon the FSWG recommendations, such as those for SB disparity-reduction procedures (at the item/performance task levels), and confirming with research that any change will not further exacerbate disparities, these actions will substantiate our belief in the feasibility of modifying an existing test for use in UC freshman admissions.