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Office of the President

THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA:

DISCUSSION ITEM

For the Meeting of May 21, 2020

STANDARDIZED COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS: CURRENT USES AND ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON USE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This item focuses on three topics: 1) administrative perspectives on uses of standardized college entrance exams (SAT/ACT) in undergraduate admissions, 2) academic perspectives on the educational value of the current approach, and 3) recommendations of the Academic Senate's Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF) for future approaches to standardized exams in admissions selection.

The Academic Senate endorsed the STTF report with the recommendation to the President that, in five years, the University revisit whether the added value of the SAT/ACT still holds, employing the methods used in the STTF report. The Academic Senate further notes the complexity, challenge, and cost of developing a new test and endorses that recommendation with significant caution.

Campus leaders will discuss perspectives on the role of standardized tests within the various ways that UC can conduct admissions selection. A panel of researchers will discuss a range of viewpoints on educational policy around standardized tests used for admissions purposes. The Academic Council and select members of the Standardized Testing Task Force will discuss the STTF findings, recommendations, and ways in which UC can advance educational equity through its approaches to standardized testing.

BACKGROUND

Admissions eligibility and selection

Admission to UC is a two-stage process. First, UC must determine whether a student is eligible for UC. Eligibility requirements guide schools and students in preparing for UC (and the California State University as well, given that these requirements are shared between the segments) and, if satisfied, guarantee California students a spot somewhere in the UC system. UC eligibility can be attained by either 1) high school grades earned in UC-required courses and standardized test scores or 2) earning a grade point average (GPA) in UC-required courses that

place the student in the top nine percent of their graduating high school class. Second, a campus must select whom to admit from their pool of applicants. Guided by the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education, UC has established its admissions requirements for eligibility to capture the top 12.5 percent of California's high school graduates. However, UC campuses receive more applications than they can accommodate and thus employ procedures that involve a comprehensive review of students for admission to a campus.

The Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) defines comprehensive review as the 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.

Comprehensive review incorporates traditional quantitative measures of academic achievement (e.g., grades in UC-required courses and test scores) as well as indicators that reflect a deeper and more nuanced evaluation of the applicants' readiness for a UC education. Rather than relying exclusively on high school course completion, GPA, and standardized test scores, comprehensive review provides campuses with the latitude to conduct a more thorough review of every application, employing broader indicators of an applicant's readiness for higher education. Merit is assessed in terms of the full range of an applicant's academic and personal achievements and likely contribution to the campus community, viewed in the context of the applicant's educational opportunities and challenges.

The 14 factors approved for consideration in the comprehensive review process are:

- Grade point average in A-G courses
- Scores on the ACT or the SAT
- Number of A-G courses beyond the minimum
- Number of and performance in honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses
- Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) status
- Quality of senior year program
- Performance in context of available opportunities
- Performance in one or more subject areas
- Outstanding work on a special project
- Recent, marked improvement in academic performance
- Special talents, achievements, and awards
- Completion of special projects undertaken in context of high school curriculum or special school events
- Academic accomplishments in context of life experiences and special circumstances
- Location of secondary school or residence

While all campuses place the highest importance on academic achievement, the review process and weight given to each of the comprehensive review factors considered can differ from campus to campus. Though differing in its use, two campuses use a combination of an academic index score alongside non-academic factors, and one campus relies solely on a fixed-weight academic

index score. Six campuses use holistic review, a method in which the totality of a student's qualifications and experiences are given a rigorous, individualized, and qualitative assessment by trained readers. In a holistic approach, no single factor is given a fixed weight and applicants' academic achievements are balanced with other pertinent qualifications in the context of the resources and opportunities available to them.

UC Testing Principles

Under authority delegated from the Board of Regents, BOARS has established principles for the appropriate uses for admissions tests.

Admissions tests will be used at the University of California to:

- assess academic preparation and achievement of UC applicants;
- predict success at UC beyond that which is predicted by high school GPA;
- aid in establishing UC eligibility; and
- aid in selecting students for admission to individual campuses.

At present, the University uses test scores to measure academic achievement and to predict future success at UC as measured by college GPAs, retention, and degree completion. Test scores are used in both stages of the admissions process, systemwide rating (i.e., eligibility determination) and local selection (i.e., comprehensive review).

Standardized Testing Task Force

At the request of President Napolitano for a set of contemporary recommendations, the Academic Senate convened the Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF) in January 2019 to examine UC's use of standardized tests. The STTF considered five questions over the course of 2019 and issued its report in January 2020. **In its report, the STTF recommended the continued use of the current standardized tests until UC has developed its own exam.**

Findings

The Task Force found that test scores predict, to a useful degree, certain student success outcomes at UC, including GPA, retention, and completion above that predicted by high school GPA. In recent years, test scores were found to be better predictors of first-year GPA at UC than high school GPA, but high school GPA was a slightly better predictor of first-year retention, UC GPA, and graduation. The STTF found that high school grading standards vary widely and that decreased variation in high school grades among admitted students has reduced the value of high school GPA in predicting success. The STTF also concluded that test scores were better predictors of success for first-generation and low-income students and students from underrepresented groups.

In 2018, 37 percent of CA resident freshman admits were from underrepresented minorities (URMs) compared to 59 percent of high school graduates. The STTF found that about 75 percent of this gap is attributable to systemic inequalities occurring before admission, of which the most significant contributor is a lack of eligibility because of a failure to complete all required A-G

courses with a grade of C or better. The additional 25 percent of the gap was due to factors associated with UC admissions decisions, of which test scores play some role, but are not the primary barrier to admission.

UC takes into account student contexts when evaluating test scores, and, as a result, the STTF found that UC admissions practices compensate for the observed differences in average test scores among demographic groups. In other words, large intergroup differences in SAT scores do not translate into major differences across student groups in admission rates at UC. The STTF attributes this to UC's use of comprehensive review, as well as UC's practice of referencing each student's performance to the context of their school.

The Task Force also found that test scores appear to receive less weight in the admissions process than high school GPA; at every campus, the admit rate was much lower for students with high test scores and low high school GPAs than for applicants with low test scores and high GPAs.

However, while the STTF found that admissions processes, notably comprehensive review, do have some offsetting effect, they do not fully make up for the disparities that result in the large underrepresentation of disadvantaged and URM students at UC. Some Task Force members noted UC's responsibility to disrupt the status quo and serve students throughout the state more equitably.

The Task Force also noted that it is not known to what extent low standardized test scores or a perception of how UC uses test scores deters students from even applying to UC and benefiting from UC's contextual review.

Key to Acronyms

BOARS	Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools
ELC	Eligibility in the Local Context
ELWR	Entry Level Writing Requirement
GPA	Grade point average
STTF	Standardized Testing Task Force
URM	Underrepresented minority

Attachments

1. Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force
2. Additional Statement from Members of the Standardized Testing Task Force