

Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF REGENTS:

DISCUSSION ITEM

For Meeting of November 18, 2021

UPDATE ON THE POTENTIAL USE OF THE SMARTER BALANCED ASSESSMENT IN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2021, the outcome of the feasibility study of a new standardized admissions test for the University of California was presented to the Regents. A conclusion of the feasibility study was that it might be possible to leverage an existing test that meets many of UC's requirements. Subsequently, President Drake requested that the Academic Senate undertake an exploration of the Smarter Balanced (SB) assessment to determine if it can provide added value to the UC freshman admissions process in an equitable manner.

The Academic Senate's Smarter Balanced Study Group (SBSG), after exploration and analysis, has recommended that **the Smarter Balanced assessment should not be used in the UC admissions process**. This item summarizes the SBSG's inquiry process, describes the rationale for their recommendation, and delineates additional recommendations intended to strengthen college preparation for UC, inform UC's admissions processes, ensure student academic success, and sustain academic excellence at UC in light of capacity concerns.

On October 21, 2021, President Drake sent a letter to Academic Council Chair Horwitz endorsing all of the recommendations provided by the Smarter Balanced Study Group and requested that Provost and Executive Vice President Brown partner with the Academic Senate to facilitate the monitoring of admissions processes and outcomes towards the end of strengthening holistic admissions.

BACKGROUND

On May 21, 2020, the Regents voted unanimously to approve the suspension of the current standardized test (SAT/ACT) requirement for undergraduate admissions until 2024 to allow the University to explore the possibility of modifying or creating a new test that better aligns with the academic content UC expects applicants to have learned, or to decide to eliminate the testing requirement altogether.

The action¹ included provisions for a feasibility study, starting in summer 2020 and ending by January 2021, to assess the possibility of identifying or creating a new test that aligns with UC college preparation goals, with the aim of advancing equity in admissions, and thus educational attainment and achievement. President Emeritus Napolitano asked Provost and Executive Vice President Brown to lead the feasibility study and to deliver a recommendation to the UC President by January 2021.

The Feasibility Study Steering Committee (FSSC) completed its work in December 2020 and recommended to President Drake that:

1. The University of California should **not** have a standardized testing requirement for freshman undergraduate admissions, starting with applicants for fall 2025.
 - a. The creation of a new UC admissions test is not feasible, primarily due to the implementation timetable set by the Regents.
 - b. The use of SAT/ACT was eliminated as a viable option per the May 2020 Regents' Action Item.
 - c. Requiring a standardized test in admissions leads to the test becoming "high-stakes" like the SAT and ACT, leading to negative equity and educationally distorting impacts.
2. The inclusion of an additional optional data point, such as a test score, may be valuable for consideration in admissions.
 - a. It may be feasible to modify an existing test for use in admissions as an additional data point, yet more information is needed to explore and evaluate the potential of using an existing test in admissions in a manner that is different from previous high-stakes use of the SAT/ACT.

In April of 2021, based on the recommendation of the FSSC, UC President Drake asked the Academic Senate to undertake an exploration of the Smarter Balanced (SB) assessment to determine if it can provide added value in the UC admissions process in an equitable manner. The Academic Senate created the Smarter Balanced Study Group (SBSG), composed of eight faculty members from across the UC system with expertise in educational testing and policy. This group was co-chaired by Mary Gauvain, Chair of the UC Academic Senate, and Madeleine Sorapure, Vice Chair of the Senate Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) (see Attachment 1).

ACADEMIC SENATE SMARTER BALANCED STUDY GROUP

Charge

The President asked the Smarter Balanced Study Group (SBSG) to explore the following questions using the BOARS principles on admissions testing as a guide.²

- Q1. What is the current evidence that Smarter Balanced assessment scores, either alone or when paired with high school grade point average (HSGPA), correlate with UC freshman

¹ <https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/may20/b4.pdf>

² <https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/mar20/b4attach2.pdf>

admission rates (by campus, by ethnicity, first-generation) as compared to SAT/ACT?

Q2. What is the current evidence that Smarter Balanced assessment scores, either alone or when paired with HSGPA, predict first-year college outcomes (GPA, persistence to year two) for UC students as compared to SAT/ACT?

Q3. Could a higher Smarter Balanced assessment score improve the probability of admission of students from underrepresented groups and of those who would be the first in their families to attend college? For example, what are the admission rates for students with lower HSGPA and higher Smarter Balanced assessment scores, disaggregated by campus, ethnicity, and first-generation status?

Q4. What measures has the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) taken to minimize any bias and disparities, at the item and instrument levels, for students who are from underrepresented groups? Are those measures reasonable and sufficient?

Process

SBSG met eight times between June and September of 2021. It conferred with representatives from the UCOP offices of Institutional Research and Academic Planning (IRAP) and Undergraduate Admissions, and it also reviewed relevant data and evidence provided by these offices. SBSG also met with representatives from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), the nonprofit collaborative that developed and oversees the SB assessment, to discuss the nature of this assessment, SBAC's efforts to assess and reduce bias, the suitability of these assessments for UC admissions, and the potential to modify them to meet the University's goals. SBSG also met with admissions officers from UC Irvine and UCLA to discuss the holistic admissions process, learn about the application review and acceptance process this past year when SAT/ACT scores were not included in the application, and discover their views on the utility of including the SB assessments in UC freshman applications. SBSG also devoted substantial time to the discussion of UC admissions goals and of testing more broadly.

OUTCOME

In September 2021, SBSG completed its inquiry and recommended to President Drake that **the Smarter Balanced assessment should not be used in the UC admissions process** (see Attachment 2). Based on the group's analyses and deliberations, the members concluded that the SB assessment is not appropriate as an admissions test, required or optional, for UC. Data show that SB 11th-grade test scores add only modest incremental value beyond HSGPA in predicting first-year grades and would likely come at the same costs as the SAT. Moreover, converting SB from a low-stakes assessment intended to measure student achievement for school accountability into a high-stakes test that would impact college admissions decisions for individual students is likely to lead to the development of SB test-preparation ventures that in the cases of the SAT/ACT have been shown to magnify score differences among demographic groups. Such test-preparation development could also undermine the purpose and current use of the assessment.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The Smarter Balanced Study Group (SBSG) stressed that it is important for the University and the community at large to understand that there is not one approach, such as a change in the admissions process, forms of support, or additional resources, that will enable us to reach our equity goals in UC admissions. Rather, multiple strategies are needed. They offered the following additional recommendations.

Build a Stronger Partnership with K–12. UC should continue to play a role in advancing educational equity in college preparation by forging a stronger academic partnership with K–12.

- Strengthen and expand high school programs that increase student access to and success in the UC A-G requirements. All K–12 students in the State should have adequate access to and support for completing the UC A-G requirements, which will also help expand the geographic diversity of UC undergraduates.
- Advocate for additional permanent legislative funding for Student Academic Preparation and Educational Partnerships (SAPEP).
- Collaborate with California high schools to monitor applications and admissions growth by high school to determine if the University is reaching students from underserved high schools.
- Encourage all California high schools to implement the SB interim assessments as a formative evaluation tool. These assessments, along with the current 11th-grade summative assessment, provide important information to students about their preparation for college.
- Work with the California State Board of Education and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) to expand the SB assessment item bank to include more challenging items in core subject areas, and also help them improve and expand the performance tasks to be more useful for teachers and students regarding college preparation.
- Investigate the use of the SB assessment as one of multiple measures used for writing placement after students enroll at UC.

Bolster the Holistic Review Process. The UC application contains significant information about students' academic experiences. However, it is time-consuming to extract and evaluate this information equitably in the context of opportunities at the student's high school. This process can be aided by the following.

- Encourage and provide adequate support and resources so that all nine campuses can use holistic review for freshman admissions.
- Develop local expertise among readers of the applications in the use of contextual information, and provide annual anti-bias training for all readers.

- Work closely with BOARS on the continuing development and implementation of the holistic review process.

Expand and Develop Resources for Students After They Enroll at UC. There are not only benefits for students, but also savings for the campus when the University invests in resources to support academic success for students after they enroll at the University.

- Fortify effective campus programs that support student success with sufficient resources and outreach to continue to help students advance to degree.
- Share information across the campuses about effective student support programs, including those within academic departments, and provide resources to campuses that want to develop these programs.
- Monitor these programs according to a common set of outcomes to ensure that they are meeting student success goals.

Research the Efficacy of the Admissions Process and Student Success. There are many important research questions about admissions that the University will need to address in the coming years. This research should be both quantitative and qualitative and be conducted in collaboration with the Academic Senate. Research actions and topics should include the following.

- A subcommittee of BOARS that includes content experts in the areas of admissions and racial equity should engage in regular monitoring of the outcomes of test-free admission to determine the impact on admissions and student success, including freshman GPA, first-year persistence, probation rates, graduation, and time to degree. Potentially contributing factors for the initial cohorts need to be taken into account, including remote learning, allowance for credit/no credit grades, limited access to counselors/college advising, and students' use of institutional supports.
- Investigate how students are faring when they get to UC. The analyses need to take into account various factors considered critical to student success at UC, including the types and extent of academic preparation before students enroll, campus climate, student's utilization of campus learning resources, and the different academic programs' guidance and support for students in their major area of study.

Qualitative study of many aspects of the admissions process is critical, including historical analysis of how this process has contributed to the disenfranchisement of communities of color at the University and detailed study of why high-achieving students from underrepresented groups who are admitted to the UC choose to go elsewhere.

Capacity Limitations. A long-range concern is how the University can step up as a system to increase capacity and serve more California undergraduate students. To sustain the academic stature and excellence of UC, this effort will require much more than teaching additional courses.

Academic programs, especially those in high demand, need to be expanded and new programs developed to address emerging research issues and meet pressing societal needs and student interests. These activities depend on the vision and effort of Senate faculty who are charged with overseeing and developing the academic programs of the University, which leads directly to the following recommendations.

- Obtain more State funding for the University to hire tenure-track faculty, both to teach and to develop programs to match this new growth in the student body.
- Develop and support more academic activities and resources outside the classroom that are appropriate and expected of a Research 1 (R1) institution.
- Provide campuses with additional academic program development resources and support that are poised for growth.

On October 21, 2021, President Drake sent a letter to Academic Council Chair Horwitz endorsing all of the recommendations provided by the Smarter Balanced Study Group and requested that Provost and Executive Vice President Brown partner with the Academic Senate to facilitate the monitoring of admissions processes and outcomes towards the end of strengthening holistic admissions.

KEY TO ACRONYMS

ACT	American College Testing
BOARS	Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools
FSSC	Feasibility Study Steering Committee
HSGPA	High School Grade Point Average
SAT	Formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test; Scholastic Assessment Test
SB	Smarter Balanced assessment
SBAC	Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium
SBSG	Smarter Balanced Study Group

ATTACHMENTS

[Attachment 1: Academic Senate Smarter Balanced Study Group \(SBSG\) Roster](#)

[Attachment 2: Report of the Academic Senate Smarter Balanced Study Group \(SBSG\)](#)