

Atkinson — the great UC innovator

University of California President Richard Atkinson is gradually becoming one of those rare figures in higher education: a university president who, maybe by accident, maybe by design, has grown into a national force for educational innovation and social policy.

Among them were Charles W. Eliot at Harvard, Alexander Meiklejohn at Wisconsin and Amherst, Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago, Theodore Hesburgh at Notre Dame, Clark Kerr at the University of California.

Some, such as Kerr, became politically or personally too hot and were run off by their boards. But even they continued to be known for their influential ideas and/or the institutions they reshaped or helped to build.

In the past generation, however, university presidents seemed far more deeply engaged in fund raising, marketing and campus politics than anything that looked very much like academic statesmanship, much less national leadership.

Atkinson, who took office in the stormy months in 1995 after the regents approved resolutions SP-1 and SP-2 banning race preferences in admission and hiring, has transcended those limits. He re-energized his university after the financial tempests and political fights of the early 1990s. But where he is most likely to leave his mark is in a radically reshaped UC admission process.

So far the attention has gone mostly to Atkinson's loud blast at SAT I, the test that 1.3 million graduating high school seniors, among them all UC freshman applicants, take every year.

Liberal critics had attacked the test for decades; now the opposition was coming from the establishment.

Atkinson, a cognitive psychologist, had long believed SAT I was unfair and distorted high school priorities. In February of last year he went public, announcing that UC wanted another test. Shortly thereafter, he declared that SAT I added little to the information already provided by applicants' grades and scores on SAT II exams — tests on individual subjects such as U.S. history or chemistry.

A couple of weeks ago, it became apparent that he was winning even before UC officially did anything. Although UC has been negotiating about a new test, both with the College Board, the organization that runs SAT, and the rival ACT testing program, the College Board announced that it was contemplating major revisions in SAT I. UC is SAT's biggest customer.

Among contemplated changes are more course-based questions in advanced math, a writing sample and possibly eliminating the verbal analogies questions that Atkinson cites as particularly egregious examples of what he regards as the test's stupidity. The College Board's directors will not act until June, but they will be acting on Atkinson's agenda.

Beyond SAT, UC has approved a broad list of admissions reforms — also Atkinson's agenda — which radically revises the way the university will admit its students.

It already has de-emphasized SAT I in admissions. It now accepts the top 4 percent of the graduates of every California high school.

It has repealed SP-1, the ban on race preferences in admissions, a partially symbolic act since Proposition 209 still prohibits use of race. But since SP-1

required UC to choose 50 percent to 75 percent of its freshmen on the basis of grades and tests alone, its repeal was a substantive act as well.

UC will now admit all students through "comprehensive review" of the complete record of every applicant — not just grades and test scores but special talents, background and achievements, community service, handicaps overcome. For public universities, most of which look only at grades and tests, that's a radical departure, and politically the riskiest. It will make close admissions decisions a lot harder to defend.

UC also promises soon to allow all high school seniors in the top 12.5 percent of their graduating classes to enter some UC campus as juniors if they do well in approved community college courses in the first two years.

Atkinson vehemently denies his reforms have anything to do with the end of affirmative action. Nonetheless, UC, like some other public universities, has been searching for alternative admissions criteria ever since the courts or voter initiatives prohibited use of race to mitigate low grades and test scores. In the past year or two, moreover, the Legislature's Latino caucus has pushed hard to open the university to more black and Latino students.

But even a university committed to high academic standards retains a democratic mission and thus has to tread a careful path between those ideals. None has done it perfectly. But in a state where whites are now a minority, and in a nation where race considerations in admission are facing mounting legal and political challenges, Atkinson, who probably will retire next year, has set a course that many others may soon follow.