

Diversity: Not There Yet

By Richard C. Atkinson
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In the weeks leading up to the Supreme Court's hearing on affirmative action, the public University of California system was depicted alternately as a dramatic success or a dismal failure in its efforts to enroll Latino and African American students after the elimination of race and ethnicity as factors in student admissions.

The truth lies somewhere in between. But as a university president who took office just after the decision in California to disallow consideration of race and ethnicity in university admissions -- and as one who retires a few months from now -- I have concluded that we are still not doing a good enough job of providing access for the full diversity of students in our state.

California is a rapidly diversifying society. In 1990, 34 percent of the state's public school students were Latinos; in 2000, the figure was 43 percent, and by 2010 it is projected to be 52 percent. Against this backdrop of stunning demographic change stands a public school system characterized by vast disparities in educational opportunity. There are many excellent public high schools, each of which sends dozens of graduates to the UC system each year. Meanwhile, there are many schools that send hardly any students to UC.

The impact of educational disadvantage is evident in students' eligibility rates for the UC system, which are defined by high school grades and standardized test scores. The most recent study found that 30 percent of Asian American students in California and 13 percent of white students met UC eligibility requirements; the figure was a disheartening 4 percent for Latinos and 3 percent for African Americans.

The university always has sought to maintain the highest possible academic standards while providing the broadest possible access to California students. We have pursued both excellence and diversity because we believe they are inextricably linked, and because we know that an institution that ignores either of them runs the risk of becoming irrelevant in a state with the knowledge-based economy and tremendously varied population of California.

The UC system in an earlier period took account of race and ethnicity in its admissions process. Latino, African American and Native American applicants were identified as "underrepresented minority" students, reflecting these groups' low eligibility rates traditionally, and that factor was taken into account in the admissions process. But a contentious vote of the Board of Regents in 1995, followed by a statewide initiative passed by California voters in 1996, ended that practice.

In its place, UC launched a greatly intensified program of outreach to public schools, working in partnership to improve academic performance and college eligibility in schools that traditionally sent few students to UC. We took on a vastly expanded role in providing professional development for K-12 teachers. And we made changes in our admissions process -- such as

granting UC eligibility to the top 4 percent of students in every California high school -- that, while not aimed specifically at diversity, have had the effect of expanding UC access for educationally disadvantaged students.

What have been the results for underrepresented minority students? In some respects, the story is encouraging. After an initial drop, these students have represented an increasing proportion of the UC entering class in each of the past four years. This year the absolute number of underrepresented minority freshmen at UC campuses exceeds the number enrolled before race and ethnicity were eliminated as admissions considerations.

But the story is troubling in at least two respects. First, the proportions of underrepresented minority students at UC's more selective campuses -- particularly UC Berkeley and UCLA -- remain far below their previous levels. Second, the gap between the percentage of underrepresented minority students in the California graduating high school class and the percentage in the UC freshman class has widened appreciably.

In 1995, 38 percent of California public high school graduates were underrepresented minority students, as were 21 percent of UC freshmen -- a gap of 17 percentage points. In 2002, however, the figures were 42 percent in the statewide high school graduating class and 18 percent in the UC freshman class -- a gap of 24 percentage points. Gains in minority admissions at UC are not closing this gap, because the diversity of the California high school population continues to grow.

What we do about this is a source of real concern. We must continue our efforts to help close the achievement gap in the public schools. We must continue refining our admissions policies to ensure that they reward high achievement and yet recognize that high achievement can be demonstrated in different ways in different educational settings.

But I offer California as a cautionary tale to the rest of the nation. Our experience to date shows that if race cannot be factored into admissions decisions at all, the ethnic diversity of an elite public institution such as the University of California may fall well behind that of the state it serves. And that is something that should trouble us all.

The writer is president of the University of California system.
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