

# The Use of Admissions Tests by the University of California

*A Discussion Paper Prepared by the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools:*

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## *Executive Summary\**

### Background

The Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) has reviewed the historical development of the University of California's admissions test policy. In BOARS' view, the 1958 recommendation to adopt admissions tests was motivated at least in part by the need to manage enrollment stresses on the University occasioned by the baby-boomer generation coming of college age. At the time, UC faculty clearly recognized the addition of admissions tests to the existing course preparation requirements as a strategy of convenience to help define the 12.5% eligible population of high school students. Although the use of tests has been reexamined several times, these reexaminations have not been used as occasions to articulate the principles that should underlie the University's use of tests nor the characteristics desired in a test. Rather, marginal adjustments have been made to a testing policy that has been in effect, largely unchanged, for more than thirty years.

Thus, University of California President Richard Atkinson's February 2001 call to examine the use of standardized tests for admissions provided an important opportunity for faculty to analyze the University's existing policy, develop a coherent set of principles to guide the use of tests, and, with these in mind, consider testing options for UC. The members of BOARS have spent nearly a year on this work. In addition to reviewing the history of the development of admissions tests and their adoption at UC, BOARS has studied statistical information regarding the contribution admissions tests make to prediction of student success at the University of California and discussed at length the policy issues inherent in the use of standardized tests as a means of determining access to public higher education. In addition, BOARS members have participated in several full-day meetings with the leading testing agencies to discuss their

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\* In the interest of brevity, we have excluded footnotes from this Executive Summary. See the relevant sections of the full body of the paper for background sources.

views and the alternatives that might be available to the University for developing a test battery that meets its policy objectives.

### Findings

**By unanimous vote, BOARS concluded that admissions tests serve a useful purpose in helping both to determine UC eligibility and to select applicants for admission to campuses that cannot accommodate all UC-eligible applicants.** While the grade point average (GPA) in UC-approved college preparatory courses taken in high school is clearly the best indicator of likely success, standardized tests can provide additional information that is helpful in illuminating the high school record and, therefore, informing decisions.

BOARS' conclusion that admissions tests can be useful is based in part on data regarding the predictive validity of the tests the University has used for the past three decades. However, these same data indicate that scores on the admissions test array currently required by the University—i.e., the SAT I math and verbal test or the ACT, plus the three-test SAT II composite (math, writing, and a test of the student's choice)—contain redundancies. In terms of their ability to predict future success, admissions tests are less reliable than the high school GPA. Although the SAT I—a test originally designed to measure “aptitude” rather than achievement—has been seen as a kind of “gold standard” of admissions tests for the past fifty years, University of California data show that scores on the SAT II's (tests more closely tied to mastery of specific aspects of the high school curriculum) provide at least equivalent predictive power. With very few exceptions, these findings apply across all campuses, all intended majors, and all different groups of students.

Perhaps more important, the advantage that the SAT I is often assumed to possess—that it is effective at identifying students with strong potential who have not yet been able to demonstrate that potential—is largely a phantom, at least at the University of California. UC data show that few students perform substantially differently on the SAT I versus the SAT II, which means that to the degree that tests identify talent not evident in the high school record, the SAT II can do this as effectively as the SAT I. Moreover, the same data show that, despite optimistic assumptions about students who excel on tests but who have not yet demonstrated this excellence in the classroom, these students do not blossom at the University. Rather, students with high test scores relative to their high school performance continue to be lackluster performers at the University. Finally, contrary to the related belief that the group of students whose SAT I scores are high relative to other indicators includes significant numbers of disadvantaged students whose attendance at weak schools has not allowed them to demonstrate their full potential, students who perform better on the SAT I than on the SAT II are likely to come from more affluent backgrounds than those who do substantially better on the SAT II.

These data about the value of tests in predicting which students will succeed have led BOARS to conclude that the question of which tests the University should employ should not be decided primarily on statistical grounds. Rather, UC faculty should concern

ourselves with the educational policy implications of our choices and with the messages we send to high schools and to students and their parents.

After full consideration of these issues, BOARS has concluded that achievement-oriented tests are both useful to the University in identifying high-achieving students and philosophically preferable to tests that purport to measure aptitude. Aptitude-type tests send the message that academic success is based in some part on immutable characteristics that cannot be changed and are, therefore, independent of good study skills and hard work. In contrast, a policy requiring achievement tests reinforces the primary message that the University strives to send to students and schools (and that is embedded in the recent decision to adopt comprehensive admissions review for all applicants): *the best way to prepare for post-secondary education is to take a rigorous and comprehensive college-preparatory curriculum and to excel in this work*. This is what the University's coursework ("A-G") and scholarship (GPA) requirements articulate. An appropriate battery of achievement tests would reinforce this message—independently and in a way that is consistent across all schools and test-takers.

### Recommendations

As noted, the members of BOARS were struck by the fact that UC faculty have not previously articulated a set of principles to guide the choice of admissions tests nor a statement of the desired properties of tests to be used by UC. Surveying other institutions reveals that this situation is not unique; in fact, the members of BOARS were unsuccessful in finding any examples of the kind of statement of principles that is needed. Therefore,

### ***BOARS recommends to the faculty the adoption of the following policy regarding the purposes and properties of admissions tests used by the University of California.***

1. Admissions tests will be used at the University of California
  - to assess academic preparation and achievement of UC applicants;
  - to predict success at UC beyond that predicted by high school GPA;
  - to aid in establishing UC eligibility; and
  - to aid in selecting students for admission at individual UC campuses.
2. The desired properties of admissions tests to be used for these purposes include the following.
  - An admissions test should be a reliable measurement that provides uniform assessment and should be fair across demographic groups.
  - An admissions test should measure levels of mastery of content in UC-approved high school preparatory coursework and should provide information

to students, parents, and educators enabling them to identify academic strengths and weaknesses.

- An admissions test should be demonstrably useful in predicting student success at UC and provide information beyond that which is contained in other parts of the application. (It is recognized that predictors of success are currently limited, and generally only include first-year college GPA and graduation rate. As this field advances, better predictors should be identified and used in validating admissions tests.)
- An admissions test should be useful in a way that justifies its social and monetary costs.

***BOARS also recommends that, as a matter of principle, the faculty regularly review UC's admissions testing policy and practices to ensure that tests are being used in a way that is consistent with these principles and desired properties of admissions tests.***

Having established the above principles regarding the use of tests and desired properties of admissions tests to be used by the University, BOARS then considered the design of a test battery that would meet these requirements.

***BOARS recommends to the faculty of the University of California a new testing array with the following components.***

1. A core achievement examination required of all students covering mastery of the fundamental disciplines needed for University-level work: language arts (reading and writing, including a writing sample) and mathematics. This examination would be roughly three hours in length. Although no currently available test meets this specification, BOARS members have discussed it in general terms with the two major national testing agencies, the College Board/Educational Testing Service and ACT Inc. Both have indicated interest in pursuing such a test option within the timeframe required—roughly two years for test development, assuming the requirement would go into effect no earlier than for the class entering in fall 2006. BOARS will remain in close conversation with both testing agencies and any new tests will undergo rigorous evaluation to ensure that they are consistent with BOARS' principles. In addition, BOARS is interested in other examination alternatives (e.g., versions of the Golden State Examination) that might emerge in the more distant future.

A critical requirement for any agency developing such a test is that it be able to produce or derive from the California core test an acceptable score equivalent to one of the two major admissions tests currently available nationally (the SAT I and the ACT). Both the College Board/ETS and ACT INC. have indicated that this is feasible. Thus, California students would not be required to take additional tests in order to apply to non-UC institutions.

- 2 . Two one-hour long examinations in specific content areas within the subjects covered by University's A-G requirements, allowing for some level of student choice in the selection of specific tests. BOARS has identified a number of options for structuring this portion of the requirement, as well as additional research that is needed.

In BOARS' opinion, this recommended test requirement provides greater breadth, depth, and rigor than the current policy. It ensures sufficient coverage of the skills most vital to post-secondary work without encompassing unneeded redundancy. Further, the proposed array increases the breadth of high school coursework covered in the subject examinations; it preserves the element of choice that allows students to demonstrate particular strengths in areas they feel they know best; it slightly reduces the test burden on students by reducing the total number of sessions and seat time required; and it ensures that scores are fully transportable to other institutions.

This policy recommendation will now be refined in discussion with faculty colleagues and other experts, as well as continued consultation with the major testing agencies. BOARS looks forward to a vigorous and productive exchange over its proposed recommendation for the future of admissions testing at the University of California.

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## **APPENDIX**

*UC and the SAT: Predictive Validity and Differential Impact of the SAT I and SAT II at the University of California (Saul Geiser with Roger Studley, October 2001).*