

BOARD OF ADMISSIONS AND RELATIONS WITH SCHOOLS
Response to the 2003-04 Eligibility and Admissions Study Group
Finding/Recommendation 9: Examination of the Extent to Which Campuses
Consider the Quality of Writing in the Personal Statement

ENDORSED BY THE ACADEMIC COUNCIL
ON APRIL 27, 2005

Introduction

In October 2003, President Robert C. Dynes established the Eligibility and Admissions Study Group (Study Group), co-chaired by Joanne C. Kozberg, Chair of the UC Regents' Committee on Educational Policy, and Bruce B. Darling, Senior Vice President for University Affairs, to examine undergraduate eligibility and admissions issues facing the University of California. In a *Final Report to the President*, dated April 2004, the Study Group submitted its findings and recommendations. Among them was Finding/Recommendation 9:

The Study Group recommends that BOARS examine the extent to which campuses consider the quality of writing in the personal statement and consider issuing guidance to the campuses on this question.

The Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) is pleased to respond to this request.

Background

The University of California requires a personal statement as part of the Undergraduate Application for Admission. The purpose of the personal statement is to give applicants the opportunity to provide information that supports and augments the data found elsewhere in the application. Unlike college essays that ask applicants to offer responses to hypothetical situations or that ask the applicant to demonstrate creativity and imagination, the information the University seeks in the personal statement should add clarity, richness and meaning to the information collected in other parts of the application form. The statement enables the applicant to explain the significance of those parts of his or her background that may not be readily apparent from the other data contained in the application. In this sense, the personal statement completes the application for admission.

In November 2001, UC Regents approved implementation of the comprehensive review process for the selection of freshmen applicants at selective campuses:

Comprehensive review encourages campuses to look more deeply into the application and to use all of the data contained therein to make the best admissions decisions.

UC faculty identified and approved fourteen criteria to be used in the selection process. The personal statement is an opportunity to direct applicants to provide additional information that is relevant and helpful in the review process. At the same time, it must

be noted that the personal statement is one component of the application and that a decision to offer admission to an applicant will never be based on the content of the personal statement alone.

Use of the Admissions Personal Statement

Applicants receive the following information regarding use of the Personal Statement in the review process:

The personal statement is an important part of your application for admission. There are limitations to what grades and test scores can tell the University about an applicant. The University uses your statement to learn more about you as an individual – your talents, experiences, achievements and point of view. Think of the personal statement as your opportunity to introduce yourself to the admissions officers and faculty who will be evaluating your application. What would you like us to know from a review of the rest of your application?

Your personal statement should reflect your own ideas and be written by you alone. Write in a natural style so that your answer conveys who you are. Present your information and ideas in a focused, thoughtful and meaningful manner. Support your ideas with specific examples. A personal statement that is simply a list of qualities or accomplishments is usually not persuasive.

UC uses the information in the personal statements to complement or expand upon information that has been provided elsewhere in the application. In this process, the quality of an applicant's writing is explicitly not considered at any campus – although admissions officers agree that a well-written answer is clearly more effective than a poorly written one.

Admissions officers, with the support of BOARS, justify this practice, which is not consistent with the practice of most selective institutions, on the basis of three factors:

- (1) UC formerly required all applicants to submit an SAT II Writing examination score and now requires them to submit scores from national and standardized writing assessments as part of the ACT or SAT in fulfillment of the UC's examination requirement, so UC evaluators have better and more reliable evidence on which to judge applicants' written communication skills;
- (2) in addition, all UC freshmen must meet the Analytical Writing Placement Examination (formerly Subject A) requirement and some submit Advanced Placement (AP) scores in language and composition; and,
- (3) since some students receive considerable help in preparing their applications, explicit consideration of the written quality of the personal statement might have the effect of biasing the process in favor of students who have more access to guidance and editorial help.

In addition, effective with the Fall 2004 admissions cycle, the personal statement was changed to include three shorter responses, rather than a single longer statement. This modification has made the quality of written expression an applicant demonstrates in the admissions process less relevant even while increasing the potential for richer and more useful admissions data. And finally, reviewing the personal statement for quality of writing places an additional burden on staff, most of whom are not trained in assessing quality of writing. The assessment of writing skills and knowledge is an academic discipline that requires advanced education, training, and experience, the kind possessed by those who develop or score the Analytical Writing Placement Examination and the standardized admissions examinations

For all of these reasons, BOARS recommends no change to current practices regarding the use of the personal statement during the application review process.