

The University of California's Distinctive Freshman Admissions Process

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Introduction. The 1868 Organic Act passed by the California legislature provided the charter for the University of California (UC), and directed the Regents to set the “moral and intellectual qualifications of applicants for admission.”¹ The Regents, in turn, have looked to the faculty for their expertise on issues pertaining to educational policy, including the academic qualifications necessary for admission. Since 1884, and under the Standing Orders of the Regents, the Academic Senate has been the primary University entity with the direct charge to set undergraduate admissions policies in all its aspects. In 1920, the Academic Senate established the Board of Admissions (which became the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools, “BOARS,” in 1939).

Unlike most land grant universities and colleges that, bowing to populist demands, were open to virtually anyone who applied, UC adopted admissions policies that were relatively selective from the beginning. Admission standards set by University faculty placed prime value on the completion of specific high school course requirements. In addition, in lieu of accreditation standards (adopted in 1963), the written recommendation of the high school principal served, for a time, as another criterion for admission. Further, recognizing the large physical size of the state and the distribution of its population, geographic representation became a criterion in admission policy: “‘Admission and tuition shall be free to all residents of the State and it shall be the duty of the Regents,’ as stated in the 1868 Act, ‘according to population, to so apportion the representation of students, when necessary, that all portions of the State shall enjoy equal privilege therein.’”² Educational opportunity was thus defined not only in economic terms, but also by geographic representation so that all Californians, in theory, would have a chance to attend the University. It should also be noted that even in the case of the University's earliest classes, women were admitted on equal footing with men.

Throughout the University's history, its promulgation of curricular requirements (which evolved by the 1930s into the predecessor to the current “a-g” subject requirements) and certification of college preparatory courses that meet those requirements have served to set consistent, clear, high and achievable standards for California high schools about the minimum academic preparation needed for college-bound students.

Historically, the University's subject requirements and the scholarship requirement that students achieve a minimum grade point average (GPA) in these courses, have functioned

¹ Douglass, J. A. (1997). “*Setting the Conditions of Undergraduate Admissions: The Role of the University of California Faculty in Policy and Process.*” (A report to the Task Force on Governance, University of California Academic Senate)

² As stated in Douglass (ibid.)

as a “road map” to students aspiring to attend UC and, since the 1960s, a guarantee of admission to those who meet the threshold requirements.

UC's admission process is unique. Admission into the University of California has unique features relative to the nation’s other prestigious colleges and universities. One feature is the concept and implementation of “eligibility.” Students considered eligible for UC admission must meet subject, scholarship, and examination requirements, which place them in the top 12.5 percent of California’s graduating senior class.

Also somewhat distinctively, the University of California’s eligibility criteria are intended to serve three key purposes:

1. To signal to college preparatory students how they should prepare for the University. The goal is to establish high, consistent, and clear academic standards for students with the promise of access to every student in the state who meets prescribed standards.
2. To signal to schools the importance of providing a strong academic curriculum. The eligibility criteria serve to communicate to high schools the importance of rigorous and engaging academic preparation, academic mastery, and how proper preparation is tied to both admission and future success at the University.
3. To provide a standard for UC to identify the top 12.5 percent of California graduating high school students. The eligibility construct defines a specific pool of students, thus functioning as the regulatory mechanism in support of Master Plan requirements. The construct has been continually redefined or recalibrated to maintain the defined level of exclusiveness. More recently, as the number of qualified applicants applying for admission to specific campuses has exceeded the new student enrollment capacity at these campuses, the eligibility standard has been augmented by campus selection processes that serve to allocate a highly qualified pool of applicants to a finite number of available spaces.

No other state system has an eligibility construct that establishes the University’s academic standards and, at the same time, makes admission available to every student in the state who meets those standards.

The UC eligibility *pool* is also unique in being defined as a proportion of high school graduates. Other states’ minimum statewide/systemwide standards are explicitly based on levels of adequate preparation and/or probability of student success.

Eligibility as an entitlement. Under the 1960 Master Plan, the University of California was to select *from among* the top 12.5 percent of high school graduates (the method by which this would occur was left to the University to determine). That provision was soon interpreted as a promise to all eligible students. As early as the 1970s, the University informed the legislature that it had put procedures in place to ensure that all qualified students were accommodated, though not necessarily at their campus or major of choice.

³ Available online at <http://www.ucop.edu/sas/adguides.html>

The idea had long guided Regental policy but it was in 1988 that the Regents provided a formal statement articulating a moral responsibility to provide a space for all students who, as defined by UC, fell within the top 12.5 percent of high school graduates:

*Mindful of its mission as a public institution, the University of California has an historic commitment to provide places within the University for all eligible applicants who are residents of California.*⁴

The Eligibility Index. In 1966, BOARS reported to the Academic Assembly that a 1965 eligibility survey conducted by the California Council for Higher Education – a state agency created under Master Plan legislation and today called the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) – estimated that the University was drawing from the top 14.6 percent of students eligible for UC. BOARS advocated the ACT/SAT and three SAT achievement tests as a means to shift “relatively easily” the eligibility pool back down to 12.5 percent. Faculty debated the addition of the tests because of their known adverse impact on under-represented students but narrowly accepted the view that they would serve as an “objective” complement to grades, which many supposed were “inflated.” Beginning in fall 1968, all freshman applicants were required to submit standardized examination scores to fulfill eligibility requirements.

BOARS developed an adjustable formula for determining eligibility based on a combination of test scores and high school grade point average. The resulting eligibility index represented a quantitative approach to assessing academic potential and rationing eligibility. Its creation also had the effect of reducing the importance of coursework and grade point average in determining UC eligibility. Unlike the curricular and scholarship requirements that were the foundation of UC admissions policy from the beginning, and that were measures of academic performance, the use of admissions tests and the creation of an eligibility index were inserted as tools to manage the surge in enrollment demand. With the implementation of an eligibility index, University admissions became more standardized and less broadly accessible.

Pathways to eligibility. At present, the University of California has three pathways to eligibility and a student can be deemed eligible by one or all of them. The three paths complement each other, offering multiple but clear paths to the University. Seventy-five percent or so of California student applicants achieved eligibility by the Eligibility in the Statewide Context ("Statewide Eligibility") path. The path is based on the assumption that students across the state are comparable in terms of educational circumstances (including quality of schooling and socio-economic and geographic circumstances). To become eligible for admission to UC by this path, students must complete a set of curriculum, scholarship, and examination requirements. The curriculum requirements are also known as a-g subject requirements and require that students, at minimum, complete the following pattern of 15 units of coursework: 2 years of history/social science, 4 years of college preparatory English, 3 years of college preparatory mathematics, 2 years of laboratory science, 2 years of the same language other than English, 1 year of visual and

⁴ The University of California Board of Regents, *University of California Policy on Undergraduate Admissions*, adopted May 25, 1988.

performing arts, and 1 year of college preparatory electives. The scholarship requirement specifies the minimum grade point average (GPA) that must be attained in a-g subjects completed by total test score minimums. The current GPA minimum is 2.8 in a-g coursework and “D” and “F” grades in these courses must be repeated or validated. The examination requirement, beginning with applicants for Fall 2006, will be the completion of the ACT or SAT, with writing test, and two SAT II tests: the minimum required test score composite for eligibility depends upon the GPA earned in a-g coursework.

Approximately 22% of California applicants achieve eligibility via the Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) pathway and is based on the assumption that students from across the state's schools may not be comparable but that they are comparable within schools (i.e., there is no within-school tracking). To be eligible by this pathway, students must rank in the top 4% of graduating high school seniors at their California high school on the basis of GPA earned on a minimum of 11 specific units of a-g subject requirements by the end of the junior year: 1 unit (academic year or two semesters of study) of history/social science, 3 units of English, 3 units of mathematics, 1 unit of laboratory science, 1 unit of language other than English, and 2 units from among the other subject requirements. Ultimately, the Statewide Eligibility pattern of 15 units must be completed prior to enrollment to be deemed “eligible.” ELC also mandates that admissions tests be taken and submitted but the scores play no role in determining eligibility by this pathway because the ELC pathway emphasizes within-school standing and competition.

About 1% of California applicants achieve eligibility only by the third path, Eligibility by Examination. The path is open to all applicants but is the only path for students who do not or cannot meet the requirements of the other two paths due to the unavailability of UC-approved coursework or grades. Currently, students who obtain a composite score of 31 or higher on the ACT or 1400 or higher on the SAT and achieve a certain minimum score on a composite of the required SAT II Subject Tests are deemed UC eligible. The underlying assumption to this path is that performance on required admissions tests is sufficient to forecast college performance.

Eligibility versus selection. Admission into UC is a two-staged process. First, UC must determine whether a student is UC-eligible (prior to enrollment, this is an estimate). Second, a campus must elect to select a student applicant. Campuses with sufficient enrollment capacity admit all applicants who meet the University's minimum eligibility requirements. In recent years, meeting the minimum eligibility requirement has often not been enough to gain admission to most UC campuses and programs. If the number of UC-eligible applicants exceeds the spaces available for a particular campus or major, the campus uses criteria to select students that exceed the eligibility requirement. Those criteria, recommended by the Academic Senate and approved by the Regents, are contained in the *Guidelines for Implementation of University Policy on Undergraduate Admissions*.⁵ Current selection guidelines call for a careful, thorough, and qualitative review of each applicant's academic and personal information. In that way, the comprehensive review policy is designed to identify excellence and achievement,

⁵ Available online at <http://www.ucop.edu/sas/adguides.html>

recognizing the individual circumstances of each student. Local campuses employ selection criteria enabling them to select students that meet their goals and objectives.

All UC-eligible students will be offered admission to a campus but not necessarily to one of their choosing.

Eligibility versus enrollment. Undergraduate enrollment levels are based on the commitment to provide access to any interested and eligible California high school graduate, with a threshold of eligibility set at the top 12.5 percent of the total public high school graduating class and a goal of maintaining a 60:40 ratio of upper to lower division students. All California graduating high school seniors who meet eligibility requirements will be admitted to at least one campus in the system, but much fewer of the 12.5% eligible actually apply. Still fewer actually enroll (63% of eligible students, historically).

Admission by exception. The University's criteria have provided a "bright line" establishing who was eligible for UC and who was not, but the faculty as early as 1884 recognized the need to admit students in exception to these standards, in order to provide opportunity for talented students from throughout the state who might not have had access to a high-quality college preparatory curriculum or to appropriate advising, but who nonetheless showed academic promise. In April 2004, the Eligibility and Admissions Study Group, chartered by UC President Robert Dynes to examine undergraduate eligibility and admissions policies and implementation issues, issued Finding/Recommendation #3 reaffirming that "Admission by Exception provides an important access path for students with outstanding talent or achievements in particular areas... as well as those from nontraditional...or disadvantaged educational backgrounds" and recommending that "the University retain the ability to utilize the full 6 percent of enrollments currently permitted"⁶ and that "BOARS re-examine current guidelines for the admission of ineligible students." BOARS' reexamination is currently in process.

⁶ University of California Eligibility and Admissions Study Group, *Final Report to the President, UC Office of the President*, April 2004, p. 3. Available online at http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/compreview/studygroup_final0404.pdf