

**RESOLUTION ON
THE FAILURE OF THE NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM
TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF UC'S DEFINITION OF
ACADEMIC MERIT**

**APPROVED BY THE ACADEMIC COUNCIL JUNE 22, 2005
AS SUBMITTED AND APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF ADMISSIONS AND RELATIONS
WITH SCHOOLS (BOARS) JUNE 15, 2005**

WHEREAS academic merit, as determined by multiple measures of student performance assessed in the context of educational opportunity, is the primary consideration for admission to a campus of the University of California; and

WHEREAS academic merit, as determined by empirically validated and intrinsically valued measures of student performance, should be the primary consideration in awarding merit-based scholarships to entering students; and

WHEREAS investigation of the use of the PSAT exam in the selection of National Merit Scholarship recipients leads to the conclusion that it does not appropriately reward academic merit due to three factors: (1) there has never been a validity study of the PSAT exam for this purpose; (2) the use of a sharp cutoff score to eliminate students is inconsistent with fundamental principles (including those of the College Board) regarding the appropriate use of standardized tests; and (3) the selection procedures of the National Merit Scholarship Program adversely affect under-represented and disadvantaged students; and

WHEREAS UC campuses have been phasing out the role of National Merit Scholarship Program standing in their admissions and financial aid decisions; therefore

NOW BE IT RESOLVED that Academic Council concurs with BOARS findings that the available evidence is insufficient to support the use of standing in the National Merit Scholarship Program either for determining UC admission or for offering merit-based scholarships at UC.

BACKGROUND

On November 15, 2001, The Regents of the University of California approved the institution of a “comprehensive review process” for freshman admissions. The Regents’ *Policy on Comprehensive Review in Undergraduate Admissions* directs UC campuses to evaluate students for admission “using multiple measures of achievement and promise while considering the context in which each student has demonstrated academic accomplishment.”¹ The policy’s accompanying *Guidelines for Implementation of University Policy on Undergraduate*

¹ *Policy on Comprehensive Review in Undergraduate Admissions*. 15 November 2001. The Regents of the University of California <<http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/regents/policies/compreview.html>>

Admissions outlines eight guiding principles to which campus admissions committees should adhere when designing their admissions procedures under the comprehensive review policy. Amongst these is guiding principle #1, which states

*The admissions process honors academic achievement and accords priority to students of high academic accomplishment. At the same time, merit should be assessed in terms of the full range of an applicant's academic and personal achievements and likely contribution to the campus community, viewed in the context of the opportunities and challenges that the applicant has faced.*²

As required by the Regents, the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS), acting for the Academic Senate, conducts ongoing reviews of campus admissions procedures and criteria to ensure consistency with the University of California freshmen admissions policies and guidelines. As part of this process, BOARS recently reviewed the National Merit Scholarship Program (NMSP) and issued recommendations that campuses reassess the use of the National Merit Scholarship designation in admissions decisions and that appropriate Senate agencies and Senior Management officials reconsider UC's participation in the scholarship program.

BOARS' independent investigation into the NMSP began in October 2004 and continued for several months and included a series of communications with the College Board and the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. As a result of this review, BOARS identified serious educational concerns regarding the National Merit Scholarship selection procedures and concluded that extra weight in admissions and scholarship decisions should not be given simply because a student has been designated a National Merit Scholar.

Specifically, BOARS has identified three major concerns with the procedure employed by the NMSP to select its scholarship winners:

- (1) The PSAT has never been validated for use to select "meritorious" students in the manner employed by the NMSP. The College Board has argued that the validity of the PSAT is based on its correlation with the SAT. However, the PSAT and the SAT are different tests, administered under entirely different conditions. The PSAT is shorter and easier than the SAT and contains very few test questions that discriminate among high scoring students. It is also now a very different test in that the new SAT contains a writing section. BOARS also found the College Board's explanation unpersuasive because tests cannot be validated by proxy. Further, *tests per se are not validated; their particular uses are.* To establish the validity of the PSAT for selection of meritorious students, one would have to determine that the specific way that the NMSP employed the PSAT to select scholarship winners, particularly its use of simple cut-off scores, truly distinguished between meritorious and non-meritorious students. Such a validity study has never been conducted. If such a study were undertaken, the extant literature on standardized tests suggests that the study would reveal that the selection procedures used by the NMSP are invalid.

² *Guidelines for Implementation of University Policy on Undergraduate Admissions.* University of California <<http://www.ucop.edu/sas/adguides.html>>

- (2) The National Merit Scholarship Program uses selection procedures that violate other fundamental principles governing responsible use of standardized tests. The NMSP uses a simple, empirically unjustified, cut-off score from a single test to eliminate students. That is all it takes into account when establishing its pool. All professional associations involved in testing say that such practices are inappropriate – major decisions should never be made on the basis of small, statistically insignificant, differences in test scores or on test scores alone. PSAT cut-off scores in the Commended Students and Semi-finalists rounds are extremely important to the NMSP: of the 1.3 million juniors who enter the competition, all but 16,000 (almost 99%) will be excluded from a Merit Scholarship solely on the basis of a PSAT cutoff score.
- (3) National Merit Scholarship Program selection procedures maximize rather than minimize negative impact on under-represented and disadvantaged students. The literature is clear that sole reliance on high-stakes, norm-referenced tests like the SAT and PSAT result in severe adverse impact: our own experience with the role of tests in admissions supports this. The criteria and selection procedures used by the program have an educationally unwarranted negative impact on disadvantaged students.

At the February 23, 2005, meeting of Academic Council, BOARS Chair Michael T. Brown informed the Council that it was issuing letters to local campus admissions committees and to Academic Council Chair George Blumenthal notifying them of the results of BOARS' study of the National Merit Scholarship Program and its selection procedures. The former letter requested that all UC campuses reconsider any admissions preferences they may be giving to applicants solely because of their designation as National Merit Scholars (Appendix A). In the latter letter, BOARS requested the assistance of the Academic Council Chair in asking the appropriate Senate agencies and administrative officials to evaluate the appropriateness of UC's participation in the NMSP with respect to scholarship and financial aid policy (Appendix B). The Academic Assembly was apprised of BOARS' actions during its March 9, 2005, meeting.

Of note, BOARS is not questioning that many National Merit Scholarship award winners are excellent students and would likely fare well, as a consequence, in local campus scholarship competitions. BOARS is questioning the way that the National Merit Scholar Program defines merit and employs that definition to select scholarship winners. As is consistent with empirical research and best practices in higher education, the University defines merit on the basis of multiple evidences of student performance and excellence, placing heaviest weight on grades earned in completing approved college-preparatory course requirements and evaluating that evidence in light of a student's educational opportunities.

During the March 30-31, 2005, meeting of the Academic Council, BOARS Chair Brown distributed a handout containing a chronology of media clips of recent BOARS' actions on this issue and announced the availability to local admissions committees and interested Council members of Professor Walter Haney's study on the National Merit Scholarship Program. Professor Haney performed the study at the request of the US Department of Education that was investigating the charges of gender bias in the awarding of National Merit Scholarships and

misuse of the PSAT over ten years ago by FairTest, a watchdog organization. That case was settled between the College Board and the U.S. Department of Education requiring changes in the way PSAT was structured and scored. The supporting documents in that case have recently been unsealed and made available to the public. Professor Haney had reached the same conclusions as has BOARS for many of the same reasons: (1) the PSAT and the SAT are very different tests and the PSAT cannot be validated by reference to the SAT; (2) the PSAT, itself, has never been validated for use in the manner employed by the NMSP; and (3) the use of a simple, unvalidated cut-score, on the basis of a single test used in a high stakes context, is educationally and psychometrically indefensible.

BOARS' recommendations regarding the National Merit Scholarship Program have received support, including a letter from the University Committee on Planning and Budget (Appendix C) and from the Education Finance Model Steering Committee, who were asked to consider BOARS' recommendations (Appendix D).

ACTION REQUESTED: APPROVAL OF THE RESOLUTION ON THE FAILURE OF THE NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM TO MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF UC'S DEFINITION OF MERIT