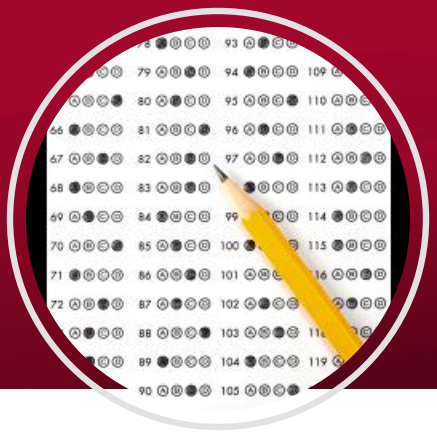
PACE

COMMENTARY

UC Regents Should Consider All Evidence and Options in Decision on Admissions Policy



AUTHORS

Michal Kurlaender | University of California, Davis

Sarah Reber | Brookings Institution

Jesse Rothstein | University of California, Berkeley

PUBLISHED: April 22, 2020

As the University of California (UC) Board of Regents approaches an important decision on the use of the SAT and ACT in UC admissions, a faculty task force report that was meant to inform and clarify has instead mischaracterized key issues. The report makes recommendations that are neither rooted in evidence nor likely to improve admissions fairness or representation across campuses. The report acknowledges many problems with the SAT/ACT's use in admissions, but its recommendation that the UC continue to use these tests while taking a decade to develop a replacement would waste both time and taxpayer dollars.

With this commentary and its accompanying detailed analyses of several aspects of the task force report, we seek to provide a more comprehensive understanding of previous research and the options at hand. Our goal is to support a better informed decision that will have major consequences for public higher education and the students who aspire to it.

As faculty who have studied these issues for years, we ask the Regents to carefully consider the research and to examine all reasonable options for bringing greater fairness to the process by which students seek admission to the UC. This would be a service not just to those young people but also to the K–12 schools that are the UC's primary pipeline.

In three separate analyses published together here, we urge the Regents to consider the following:

- **Admissions policies that put substantial weight on SAT scores create barriers to admission for students from underrepresented groups and lead to less diversity.** A fair admissions system would not place as much emphasis on SAT scores—which are proxies for opportunity—as the UC does now. UC campuses could put greater emphasis on high school grades without creating grade inflation that would undermine the fairness or validity of admissions decisions.
- **Expanding the number of students who meet the Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) cutoff will do little to change admissions outcomes or increase diversity.** Students who are in the top 9 percent (by GPA) of their high school class qualify for the ELC program and are "guaranteed" admission to "a UC campus that has space." In practice, this guarantee only applies to UC Merced and few students enroll in the UC by this path. A more effective ELC policy would require every UC campus to guarantee admission to some percentage of top students from every California high school.
- **Too quick dismissal of Smarter Balanced (SBAC) assessments in UC admissions ignores their potential.** The SBAC is a professionally developed set of tests administered to all public high school students that is designed to measure how well they have mastered state academic standards. Using the SBAC for admissions would send an important signal: The best way to prepare for college is to master what is taught in the state's K–12 schools. The task force identified several practical issues that would need to be addressed for the UC to use the SBAC in admissions, in addition to or instead of the SAT/ACT; these could be resolved through a productive collaboration with K–12.

The suggestion that the UC spend close to a decade developing a new test is wasteful and misguided. The UC has the chance now to form a partnership with K–12 on admissions and academic expectations that would strengthen both systems and provide a service to students who aspire to attend the state's 4-year colleges. Greater reliance on other validated measures of college readiness—such as GPA and the SBAC—could improve equity while simultaneously aligning the now-disjointed expectations of high schools and universities.

Our goal in putting forward these analyses is to support an evidence-based and responsible decision. Unfortunately, the task force report has muddied more than it has clarified and is too hasty in dismissing options that should remain on the table. As the Regents weigh the options before them, we strongly encourage them to consider perspectives beyond the task force report, including those we provide here.

Michal Kurlaender is Professor of Education Policy and department chair of the UC Davis School of Education, and faculty director of Policy Analysis for California Education and Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research. Sarah Reber is Associate Professor of Public Policy at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and Rubenstein Fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution. Jesse Rothstein is Professor of Public Policy and Economics at the University of California, Berkeley where he directs the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment and the California Policy Lab.

Suggested citation

Kurlaender, M., Reber, S., & Rothstein, J. (2020, April 22).*UC Regents should consider all evidence and options in decision on admissions policy* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/uc-regents-should-consider-all-evidence-and-options-decision-admissions-policy

PACE
Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

