

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

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Call to Eliminate SAT Requirement May Reshape Debate on Affirmative Action

U. of California proposal is likely to reverberate nationwide

BY JEFFREY SELINGO AND JEFFREY BRAINARD

WASHINGTON
THE ADMISSIONS POLICY at the University of California is going through more proposed rewrites than a Hollywood script.

In 1995, the Board of Regents barred the use of affirmative action in university admissions.

In 1999, the board agreed to a change in which the top 4 percent of graduates from each high school in the state would be accepted, as of this year.

Last fall, the system's president, Richard C. Atkinson, proposed extending offers of admission to students in the top 12.5 percent of every high-school graduating class in the state if the students completed two years at a California community college first. That proposal is under review by faculty leaders.

Early last week, Mr. Atkinson proposed what might be the biggest change yet: dropping the requirement that applicants take the SAT, the most widely used college-entrance exam.

If that idea becomes reality, the prestigious, 170,000-student system, which helped the standardized test gain national prominence more than three decades ago, would become the first large public university with competitive admissions to drop the SAT.

In a speech here to hundreds of college presidents at a meeting of the American Council on Education, Mr. Atkinson said the SAT is "distorting educational priori-



CORBIS-BETTSMANN

ties" by forcing students to spend too much time preparing for it. In place of the SAT, which is divided into math and verbal sections, he suggested that the faculty and regents of the university system adopt a less quantitative, more "holistic" set of admissions criteria, which would recognize a wider range of academic and individual achievement. Those criteria would in-

■ MANY RESEARCHERS QUESTION THE fairness of state policies on testing: A14

clude tests that measure specific subject areas, like the SAT 2 (previously known as achievement tests).

"Change is long overdue," Mr. Atkinson said in the speech.

His proposal could reach further than just the eight undergraduate campuses of the University of California. Since the SAT scores of black and Hispanic students are lower, on average, than those of other students, government and college officials may try to eliminate the use of the test, in an effort to broaden racial and geographic diversity in public colleges without using racial preferences. Such preferences are banned in California, Texas, and a few other states.

If that happens, California could lead the nation in finding an alternative to affirmative action, much like Texas did when it adopted a plan to link admissions to class rank in 1997. California and Florida later adopted similar plans. Mr. Atkinson has insisted that his idea is not an affirmative-action measure.

DIGESTING THE PROPOSAL

A few days after Mr. Atkinson's speech, the president of the University of Texas at Austin, Larry R. Faulkner, said in an interview with *The Chronicle* that he would convene a committee to "begin preliminary discussions" about the university's admissions criteria.

Faculty members on the University of California's campuses last week were beginning to digest Mr. Atkinson's proposal,

which requires their approval, along with that of the regents.

For the most part, faculty leaders are tight-lipped about the SAT proposal. But some professors question both the rapid pace of the recent changes and what they say is the lack of a vision of how the new policies would interact. That, some professors said, might hurt the quality of the system—particularly on the two campuses, Berkeley and Los Angeles, that are among the most selective

public universities in the country.

"It scares me to death," says Matthew Malkan, a physics and astronomy professor at U.C.L.A. and former chairman of the university's Academic Senate admissions committee. "We have a fairly small number of solid predictors of academic success at the university. The SAT is the only measure which is applied uniformly to every applicant, every year."

BROADENING ACCESS

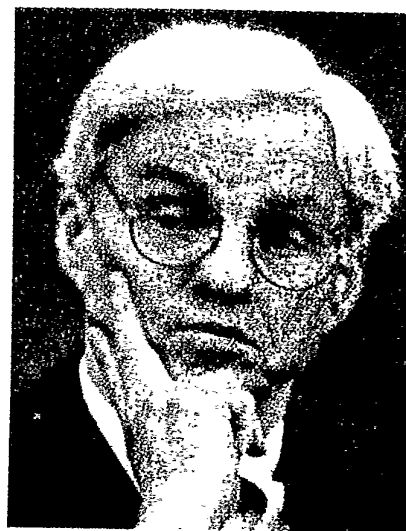
A few faculty members say they see the plan as yet another effort by university officials to broaden access in the wake of Proposition 209, the ban on affirmative action that was approved by the state's voters in 1996, making the regents' ban a year earlier a moot point. Since then, California has explored other ways to increase minority enrollments, most notably through the 4-percent plan and outreach programs in

Continued on Following Page



AP/WIDE WORLD

Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, plans to "talk to people and tell our side of the story—it's a strong one."



DENNIS BRACK, BLACK STAR

Richard C. Atkinson of the U. of California: The SAT should be eliminated as an admissions requirement because it is "distorting educational priorities."

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Continued From Preceding Page

the public schools, as well as through the so-called dual-admissions proposal with the community colleges.

The university's efforts, while they have not significantly improved black and Hispanic enrollments on the most-selective campuses, may have prevented a sharp decline following Proposition 209. Still, minority legislators and advocates for minority students have continued to pressure the university to take further action.

"This is not really a bold step," says Stanley W. Trimble, a geography professor at U.C.L.A., who supports keeping the SAT. "It's merely surrendering to the idea that certain members of the state Legislature are going to get the student body they want however they want to do it."

A spokesman for Lt. Gov. Cruz M. Bustamante, a Democrat and the state's highest-ranking lawmaker of Hispanic origin, said last week that Mr. Atkinson had acted on his own, with no input from lawmakers.

A SURGE IN ENROLLMENT

For his part, Mr. Atkinson denies that his SAT proposal was made in response to the state's ban on racial preferences, although he acknowledges that such a change could make the university more accessible to low-income and minority students. As the system prepares for a surge of 53,000 additional students over the next decade, he says, its admissions process must be seen as evenhanded by everyone.

"The ethnic mix of the high-school classes have to perceive that we are fair and that we have an open-door policy based on their performance in high school," he said in an interview.

In his speech, Mr. Atkinson questioned the value of the SAT as a predictor of students' ability in college. What's more, he said, the university system's reliance on it had pressured students, parents, and teachers to focus too much attention on preparing for the test. He called the competition for high SAT scores "the educational equivalent of a nuclear-arms race."

A cognitive psychologist who specializes in memory and learning, he called for the development of admissions tests that would "create a stronger connection between what students accomplished in high

school and their likelihood of being admitted to U.C., and focus student attention on mastery of subject matter rather than test preparation."

Under his proposal, applicants would continue to be required to take the so-called SAT 2 exams, which test students' knowledge in writing, mathematics, and their choice of one from among more than a dozen other subjects. Mr. Atkinson said those tests, too, have limitations, but are closer to the content-oriented tests he envisions than is the general SAT.

Currently, California admissions officials require students to take both the SAT and the SAT 2, and combine those scores with high-school grade-point averages to attain overall numerical results. Depending on the campus, 50 to 75 percent of students are now admitted to the university based solely on those scores.

Mr. Atkinson also noted a study that examined the relative ability of the SAT and grade-point averages to predict the academic success of applicants to the university. The study found that the SAT, in combination with grade-point averages and the SAT 2, did not provide significantly more predictive power than the combination of grades and the SAT 2 alone.

A DIFFICULT TRANSITION

He acknowledged that a shift to a more "holistic" evaluation of applicants would be difficult. As the state's most prominent public institution, the University of California receives many more applications than it has admissions slots, particularly on its more selective campuses. Large public universities have traditionally depended on the SAT or comparable tests as an objective and streamlined way to make at least the initial cut among the many applications they receive. Officials of such institutions have said getting rid of standardized tests and depending more on subjective measures of student quality, as small, private institutions typically do, would require significantly larger admissions offices.

Whether large public universities in other states will follow California's lead in dropping the SAT is not yet known. "It's hard to believe that it won't at least start the conversation at other public universities, since the University of California sys-

tem is so well known," says Donald E. Heller, an assistant professor of education at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. "But I would think that most places would wait and see before going as far as to drop the SAT."

PROBLEMS IN TEXAS

In Texas, where affirmative action is banned by a federal-court decision, the leaders of the state's two flagship institutions, the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University, say they already admit about half of their freshman classes without taking the SAT into consideration, because the admittees rank in the top 10 percent of their high-school classes.

Dropping the SAT for the rest of the applicants in Texas presents some problems, the officials said. Unlike the University of California, neither of the two public flagships in Texas requires the SAT 2. If they were to drop the SAT, it might have to be replaced by the SAT 2 or a statewide achievement test, the officials said, so that the admissions process is perceived as fair in light of the wide variation in quality and grading standards at Texas high schools.

"I'm concerned that people who want to come to school here, who have high SAT scores, don't feel that they are diminished," says Ray M. Bowen, president of Texas A&M.

The biggest impact of Mr. Atkinson's announcement could be on the College Board, which owns the SAT, and the Education Testing Service, which administers it. More students take the SAT in California than in any other state. Last year, 12 percent of the 1.3-million high-school seniors who took the test were from California. "If I were someone in Princeton at E.T.S., I'd be concerned," Mr. Heller said.

Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, says the organization plans to "talk to people and tell our side of the story—it's a strong one." The College Board, he adds, is already studying ways in which the SAT could provide colleges with information on an applicant's creativity, practical skills, and knowledge.

"I'm convinced that he is very wrong," Mr. Caperton says of Mr. Atkinson. "I don't think there are going to be people in a rush to recommend what he proposed."

But the proposal has drawn praise from those who have worked to abolish the use of the SAT in college admissions. "The SAT has been overpromoted, oversold by its advocates to the point that it might be collapsing under its own unfulfilled promises," says Robert A. Schaeffer, public-education director for the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, also known as FairTest.

In California, consideration of Mr. Atkinson's idea is expected to begin as soon as this week. The proposal is already on the agenda of the admissions committee of the statewide Academic Senate. Michael Cowan, chairman of the university's Academic Council, the senate's steering committee, describes early reaction from faculty members as "all over the map."

"One theme is that the faculty seem sympathetic to exploring ways of attracting a wider array of students," says Mr. Cowan, a professor of American studies and literature on the Santa Cruz campus. "Another theme is that faculty want to make sure that nothing is done that would lower quality."

FACULTY SKEPTICS

A few faculty members predict that the SAT proposal will face a lot more resistance than the 4-percent plan did. "The 4-percent rule was less of a threat to academic standards; because it was a relatively small group of students," says Mr. Malkan, the U.C.L.A. astronomy professor. "This is sort of access across the board."

Faculty opinion could weigh heavily among several members of the Board of Regents. Some of them publicly support the idea, while others say they will take a wait-and-see approach.

Ward Connerly, the regent who led the campaigns to ban affirmative action in California and Washington State, says he will remain "neutral" on the idea until the faculty group makes its recommendation.

Mr. Connerly does offer this thought, however: "In two reports Dick [Atkinson] has sent to the Board of Regents in the last 90 days, he has extolled the virtues of the student body. Those students were selected under a system he wants to throw out, and for the life of me I want to know why we're fixing it."