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UC President Pitches Plan To End Use of SAT in Admissions

By John Gehring

The president of the University of California system, contending that an overemphasis on college-entrance exams has led to "the educational equivalent of a nuclear arms race," last week proposed eliminating SAT scores as a requirement for admission to the 170,000-student system.

The announcement came in a speech Richard C. Atkinson delivered before several hundred university presidents, other top college administrators, and other higher education officials at the American Council on Education's annual meeting in Washington.

Mr. Atkinson, the founding chairman of the National Research Council's board on testing and assessment, said that the push to prepare for college-entrance exams had overshadowed the importance of authentic learning in the nation's classrooms.

Some 1.3 million college-bound seniors took the SAT last year; more than 1 million took the other major undergraduate-admissions test, the ACT.

In a letter sent Feb. 17 to the university system's academic senate, Mr. Atkinson recommended that the 10-campus system require only standardized tests, such as the SAT II, that assess the mastery of specific subjects: writ-

ing, mathematics, and one other subject of the student's choice.

Such tests, he argued, would be a better fit for the admissions process because they test students in well-defined subject areas rather than measuring broader problem solving in verbal and math skills.

Mr. Atkinson said the SAT II has proven to be a better predictor of college performance. He also recommended that the system move away from an admissions process that uses narrowly defined formulas and instead evaluate applicants in a more "holistic" manner.

Mr. Atkinson called for the development of standardized tests "directly tied to the college-preparatory courses" that UC requires of applicants. Until such tests are available, he said, the university should use the SAT II.

Matthew Gandal, the vice president of Achieve, a Cambridge, Mass.-based organization that promotes higher academic standards, said such a move could aid efforts to align standards and expectations between K-12 and the higher education world.

"This is a step in the right direction," Mr. Gandal said, noting that high school students and parents now get mixed signals because the high-stakes accountability exams have no connection to the SAT.

Greater collaboration between secondary and postsecondary institutions, he said, is "the missing piece in the accountability puzzle."

Test Defended

Gaston Caperton, the president of the New York City-based College Board, which owns the SAT, defended the value of the test as providing a national standard that encourages high achievement. "Dropping the SAT makes no more sense than dropping classroom grades," Mr. Caperton, a former governor of West Virginia, said in a statement.

"When professional admissions officers use the SAT and classroom grades, in combination with extracurricular activities, personal essays, and recommendations, they have a powerful set of tools," he said.

Mr. Atkinson, in making his case to his postsecondary colleagues, described a recent visit to an upscale private school where 12-year-old students were studying long lists of verbal analogies to prepare for the SAT.

"The time involved was not aimed at developing the students' reading and writing abilities, but rather their test-taking skills," said Mr. Atkinson, a former visiting scholar at the Educational Testing Service, which adminis-

ters the SAT for the College Board.

"What I saw was disturbing, and prompted me to spend time taking sample SAT tests and reviewing the literature," he said. "I concluded what many others have concluded—that America's overemphasis on the SAT is compromising our education system."

Mr. Atkinson's proposal to drop the SAT requirement would have to be approved by the university system's academic senate and the UC board of regents—a process likely to take about a year, said Michael Cowan, the faculty senate's chairman. If adopted, the proposal could take effect in 2003.

"There has been a lot of talk about this kind of recommendation," Mr. Cowan said. "The faculty is very supportive of the overall goal of increasing access to high-quality students, and the president sees this [proposal] as one of the ways to do this."

Terry Hartle, a senior vice president of the American Council on Education, a Washington-based umbrella group for higher education, said such a significant proposal from the president of what many consider to be the nation's premier public university system, would stimulate discussion in admissions offices nationwide.

"I'm not sure it will lead to less

testing, but it is a movement in the direction of another kind of testing," Mr. Hartle said. For many years, he said, universities have relied on a "three-legged stool"—test scores, student essays, and transcripts—to make admission decisions.

But that approach has been tweaked, Mr. Hartle said, as college and university admissions officials have experimented with alternative ways to balance the goals of improving access to postsecondary education, increasing racial and ethnic diversity on campuses, and maintaining high standards.

Christina Perez, a testing reform advocate at FairTest, a Cambridge, Mass.-based advocacy organization that is critical of the SAT and other standardized tests, praised Mr. Atkinson's proposal. She contends that college-entrance exams are flawed and biased.

"If the SAT is a yardstick, it is a yardstick made of Silly Putty," Ms. Perez said, adding that she expects the proposal to cause a stir among higher education institutions.

"If such a large and prestigious system like the University of California can go SAT-optional," she said, "[it shows that] other colleges and universities can do the same."