

# Call to End SAT Exam <sup>22</sup> Sets Off UC Debate

Some fear bold step may lower standards

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A call by University of California President Richard Atkinson to drop the basic SAT aptitude exam in admissions has been widely heralded as a bold step in the right direction, but it also has ignited a fierce debate.

Many experts worry that the achievement test Atkinson wants as a replacement to the SAT will perpetuate existing inequities, while others fear it will result in a drop in admission standards at the nation's top public institution.

"We have a K-12 system where there are great discrepancies between the haves and the have-nots," said UC Regent Judith Hopkinson. "I don't understand how what the president is proposing deals with that."

But Atkinson said he hopes the proposal, which still needs faculty review and the regents' approval, will help to improve teaching in elementary and high schools in the long run. Atkinson said the move would ensure that admission tests measure what students learn in school, not just their innate intelligence or their test-taking abilities. He realized reform was necessary after visiting a private school and finding 12-year-olds drilling for the SAT.

But the school system is slow to change, and any improvements will require well-trained teachers and an improved curriculum, experts say. And as long as dramatic disparities exist between schools in California, no test can be used fairly in admissions, said Maria Blanco, regional counsel for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund in San Francisco.

"We will just reproduce California public schools' inequities at the higher education system," she said. Still, she said, the president is "on the right track."

Gaston Caperton, former governor of West Virginia and now president of the College Board, which administers the tests, said education reform is never as simple as Atkinson is making it seem; it takes a complex combination of factors.

If students at different schools have calculus teachers with disparate skills, he said, it will show up on the test.

"His approach is to scapegoat the SAT as a way of not dealing with the hard things that have to be dealt with," Caperton said.

But State Superintendent of Schools Delaine Eastin said disparities exist now and the move by UC would complement what the state is trying to do. It could help speed up an effort to get consistent standards implemented in classrooms throughout California.

"We are trying to get more of the indicators headed in the same direction," Eastin said.

Robert Schaeffer, public education director for FairTest, a

► **EXAM:** Page A6 Col. 2

## Call to Drop SAT at UC Sets Off Admissions Debate

► **EXAM**  
From Page A3

nonprofit organization that opposes the use of the SAT and supports broader assessments, said UC will face the same problems the state has in its K-12 testing program.

"It is very hard to figure out which facet of the curriculum you are going to test," Schaeffer said.

The SAT II, which tests subject matter instead of basic aptitude and would serve as the only UC admissions test until another is developed, has been criticized by experts.

Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences and formerly a UCSF professor, cited the SAT II biology test as an exam that forces the wrong kind of teaching. Teachers prepare kids with a narrow focus when they are compelled to use textbooks and exams as a guide, he said in a 1995 convocation on major problems in education at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, Mass.

It is also expensive to craft an exam that educators and experts agree is a good one. Schaeffer said.

But UC spokesman Brad Hayward said the UC system considers it a worthwhile investment.

The move away from the SAT I is seen as a possible way to increase the diversity of students admitted to the University of California without the use of racial or ethnic preferences — which were eliminated in 1997.

Statistics from the College Board show the gap between white and underrepresented minority test-takers in California narrowing slightly on the SAT II achievement test.

But faculty and some regents worry that getting rid of the SAT I could lower standards or at least send the message that UC is lowering the bar.

Sue Johnson, president of the

she gets details on the implications.

"It may in the long run not be good for UC in terms of having the best students who attract the best faculty," she said.

In addition, preparatory courses for any new test will sprout up soon after its implementation, many experts said.

Michael Cowan, president of the Academic Senate, said the faculty — which will review the president's proposal and make a recommendation to the regents —

will take from eight to 12 months to reach a conclusion.

"They need to be persuaded it makes good academic sense," he said. "I think UC faculty don't want to be perceived as lowering academic standards in order to improve access."

But Richard Black, assistant vice chancellor for admissions and enrollment at UC Berkeley, said the campus could make fine admission decisions without any test scores.

Berkeley, along with UCLA, al-

ready considers an applicant's achievement in a broader context.

"We open the folder and we look at what the student has done, the courses the student has taken, what grades the student has gotten and the course of their academic experience," Black said. "Test scores are certainly something we look at, but if they weren't there, there is a wealth of information."

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Richard Atkinson, UC president, said he found 12-year-olds in a private school drilling for the SAT.

UC Board of Regents, acknowledges that the present test may discriminate against students who cannot afford expensive preparatory courses. But she is not ready to endorse dumping the test until