

DH20015758 E/

Broader Admissions Criteria Near Approval at U. of California

BY JEFFREY SELINGO

THE University of California Board of Regents last week appeared poised to approve an overhaul of the system's admissions process that would drastically broaden the criteria on which applicants are evaluated and would put an end to decision making based solely on academic factors.

A committee of the regents overwhelmingly approved the proposal, and the full board was expected to agree to the plan late last week.

The regents' debate over the proposal, which at times turned contentious, centered on whether a move toward so-called comprehensive admissions would lower the student body's academic quality.

Opponents questioned the need for greater reliance on subjective criteria at a time when the university system has been enrolling some of its most academically talented students ever. But supporters predicted that by adopting an admissions process similar to those used by many other selective colleges, the nine-campus system would encourage students to make the most of their high-school years and take a greater number of challenging courses.

"We're not doing anything creative," Richard C. Atkinson, the university system's president, told the board. "We're simply moving in the direction in which every other competitive university is."

RAPID CHANGES

Adoption of the policy would mark yet another chapter in a series of rapid changes to the admissions practices of the nation's most prestigious public-university system. Those efforts, pushed largely by Mr. Atkinson, are seen by many of his critics as a way to increase the representation of minority stu-

dents in the wake of a ban on affirmative action that was approved by California voters in 1996.

Already, in-state applicants who were in the top 4 percent of their high-school graduating classes are automatically admitted to a campus of the university system.

In July, the board agreed to guarantee admission for some California students who had completed their first two years at a community college (that plan was later put on hold because of a lack of state funds). And next spring, the regents are expected to consider a highly publicized plan to drop the SAT I as a requirement for admission.

The comprehensive-admissions policy, which would go into effect immediately, would replace the system's two-tier selection procedure. Under that process, 50 percent to 75 percent of applicants are admitted based solely on 10 academic criteria, such as grades and test scores; the rest are accepted using both the academic criteria and other factors, such as special talents and experiences with adversity.

Under the comprehensive-admissions policy, all applicants would be judged based on a single set of criteria that includes the academic factors and the personal attributes now used to evaluate only the second tier of applicants.

The proposed process would be expected to cause concern largely among applicants to the system's most-competitive campuses, Berkeley and Los Angeles. That's because the policy would change how students are accepted only at the individual campuses. Students are deemed eligible for the overall system based on their grades and test scores, or by rank-

ing in the top 4 percent of their high-school graduating classes.

At Berkeley, however, admissions officials maintain that the proposed process would have had very little impact on students admitted for this fall. They reviewed the applications of 1,000 students who had gained admission and found that all but 4 percent of them would have been accepted if comprehensive admissions had already been in place. The students who would have failed to make the cut tended to be near the bottom of the first tier and had thin records of achievement outside the classroom, officials said.

The statewide Academic Senate, which represents faculty members on all the campuses, unanimously approved the proposed admissions policy earlier this month. "Comprehensive review will strengthen the academic quality of the incoming classes," said Chand R. Viswanathan, chairman of the Academic Council, the Senate's steering committee.

"It helps us identify students who took advantage of the opportunities that were available to them and rewards those who achieved the most with what was available."

ULTERIOR MOTIVES?

But some regents questioned the proposal's intent. Ward Connerly, a regent who led successful efforts in California and Washington to eliminate affirmative action in admissions, wondered if the policy was nothing more than a backdoor way to increase the number of minority students. University officials have said they don't expect the racial makeup of classes to change substantially.

"There isn't anyone on the plan that doesn't realize the basic in-

A New Admissions Process

The University of California's Board of Regents last week neared approval of a plan to overhaul the system's admissions policy. Here's how the proposed admissions process, called "comprehensive review," differs from the current one:

Current Process

Under a two-tier selection procedure, each of the system's nine campuses admits from 50 to 75 percent of its incoming students based solely on academic criteria, such as grades, test scores, and performance in honors or Advanced Placement courses. The remainder of each class is selected using both the academic factors and other criteria, including special talents, experiences with adversity, and the location of each applicant's high school.

Proposed Process

The two-tier system disappears. All applicants are evaluated on a single set of criteria, which include the old system's academic factors as well as the personal attributes formerly used only to judge students in the second tier of the admissions pool.

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

spiration for this," Mr. Connerly said, "and that's to affect the racial composition of the University of California. This was not brought to us because we want to improve the academic quality of the University of California."

Even so, Mr. Connerly voted for the plan in committee after supporters agreed to add a statement to the policy that would prohibit the use of racial preferences in reviewing applications. Debate over that statement became heated at one point, when Robert M. Hertzberg, a regent and speaker of the California State Assembly, questioned whether the language was even needed, given the statewide ban on affirmative action. Mr. Connerly then asked why he was "afraid" to insert the words, and another regent, William T. Bagley, responded: "They're worried about Ward Connerly taking off on his cause again." Mr. Bagley later apologized for his statement.

The 2001-2 state budget has already set aside \$750,000 to put the comprehensive-admissions policy in place, primarily to hire additional admissions counselors to read applications. The regents also agreed to require an annual report by the university system's president on the policy's effects.

COMING NEXT

The next big proposal to come before the Board of Regents will be Mr. Atkinson's plan to eliminate the SAT requirement. At least one regent said last week that the vote on comprehensive admissions was likely to reshape the debate on the SAT.

"My guess is that it will strengthen the desire to keep the SAT," said S. Sue Johnson, the board's chairwoman, who voted against the new admissions procedure in committee. "We're going to need all the tools available to review and assess students now."