



LOW INCOME, HIGHER ED

When it comes to admitting low-income students, a nationwide study of 50 research universities gave most University of California campuses an "A." No campus outside California earned better than a "C." But budget constraints and enrollment caps have put that notable record at risk. By Pam Burdman



**LIMITED
ACCESS**

With all the furor surrounding race and ethnicity in the University of California, one stunning fact has for years gone unremarked: UC's campuses stand first among the nation's best universities in providing opportunity to needy students.

It is an enviable record, but one that now is at risk because of the state's fiscal problems and enrollment constraints that ripple throughout higher education, affecting not only UC but the California State University system and the state's vast array of community colleges.

The record itself is worth reviewing. As of two years ago, nearly one-third of UC students were classified as low income and therefore eligible for federal Pell Grants. On a national ranking of educational opportunity at some 50 U.S. research universities, nearly every UC campus received an "A," while no campus outside of California received better than a "C."

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Howard Perdue, vice chancellor for enrollment, Peralta Community College District

And even as most schools on the list were growing less diverse in economic terms, UC campuses were enrolling increased numbers of underprivileged students. In 1992, for example, 27 percent of Berkeley’s students were eligible for Pell Grants. By 2001, that proportion had climbed to 32 percent. That share stands out not only against elite schools, mainly high-cost privates, but also among public flagships, where Berkeley ranks in the top five nationally (along with the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque and SUNY-Buffalo) for enrollment of low-income students.

Tom Mortenson, an Iowa-based higher-education policy analyst who conducted the studies, found no secret to UC’s success: “Nothing stood out, except that they were doing everything and they were doing it right.”

The statistics reveal a commitment to expanding opportunity that is not just rhetorical but visible in policies, such as limited tuition increases, sufficient financial aid, admissions policies mindful of students’ income status, and outreach programs help promising disadvantaged students get ready to attend college.

Mortenson frequently cites California when he admonishes other states to pay more heed to economic equity. “The point I make is that if the UC system can develop the best national universities and enroll low-income kids, then anybody else should be able to [who] cared to,” he said.

That same devotion to affordability has kept the doors of California State University campuses open, ensured community college students the lowest fees in the nation and established the state’s need-based Cal Grant program. That sense of equity

earned the state an “A” for affordability in “Measuring Up 2002,” a higher education report card published by the San Jose-based National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Cracks in the commitment

But there are cracks in California’s commitment, thanks to the state’s crushing fiscal crisis and each “do right” approach on behalf of low-income students has come under threat. A multi-year compact struck between the governor and the universities would lift undergraduate tuition another 14 percent this year and preserve the institutions’ in-house financial aid funds, but there was no compact with the Student Aid Commission for corresponding increases in the number of Cal Grants. After first proposing to freeze the need-based awards, the governor agreed to use one-time money from a student loan fund to increase the grants this year. With no state money promised for outreach programs, UC and CSU were scrounging for other funds to keep those efforts alive.

“If we’re not careful, if we don’t plan, if we don’t put into effect ameliorating programs or look closely at this, there is a danger that we’re going to disproportionately impact [low-income students],” acknowledges Francisco Hernandez, vice chancellor of student affairs at UC Santa Cruz. “I don’t think that the consequences to the state have been fully considered. If we don’t give these students the opportunity to attend college, then we’re limiting their options and our options as a state for economic recovery.”

There were some signs that a 40-percent tuition increase over two years was already taking a toll. This year,

for the first time since 1993 — the last major tuition hike — fewer freshmen applied to UC than did the previous year. Nearly 74,000 students sought freshman seats, compared with about 77,000 last year, and drops were noted among students whose parents didn’t attend college and students from rural areas. At the same time, the lower-cost CSU campuses witnessed a 16 percent jump in applications over last year.

But even if threats to affordability are eliminated in budget negotiations, seats at the state’s universities are becoming increasingly scarce. Several dynamics are coalescing to constrain the supply of slots available, especially among the most vulnerable populations. The state’s refusal to pay for additional students to attend the UC campuses this year, intensified scrutiny from Board of Regents Chairman John J. Moores to justify admission of students with below-average SAT scores, and pressure from Sacramento for UC to tighten eligibility requirements in order to return to the Master Plan target of admitting the top one-eighth of graduating seniors.

Following the governor’s plan, the universities implemented enrollment reductions of 10 percent of new freshmen for the fall, and that alone is causing a ripple effect throughout higher education. It is a grand reshuffling, and at the end of the day it will be impossible to sift through college enrollment numbers and say which students were impacted by which policy decisions. What is easy to predict, however, is that the students who will bear the increased burden — or, some fear, be lost to higher education altogether — are the most vulnerable,

especially poor students with less-educated parents and those who attend the bottom quartile of the state's high schools.

For the first time in 44 years, UC did not have seats for all eligible freshmen. Instead, campuses sent "rain checks" to 7,600 California high school seniors, guaranteeing them a space in two years if they attend a community college. While some UC applicants would rather attend a private university or go out of state for college, for others, the option of a guaranteed transfer to a UC campus was attractive.

"At first there was great disappointment," noted Joan Catelli, a counselor at Lowell High School in San Francisco, one of the UC's top feeder schools. "But now I've seen kids who are so happy that they have gotten guaranteed transfers to the most selective of the UC campuses."

Other formerly UC-bound students are choosing to enroll at CSU campuses, some of which are feeling the crush since the 23-campus system is also slashing enrollment. By early May, faced with the goal of reducing 23,000 seats, only six CSU campuses had openings, and at least one — Sonoma State — had announced it would have to delay some already-admitted students to the spring semester.

"For the first time in almost 25 years I've been doing budgets, the Legislature openly declared, 'Don't take any more students, because we're not going to provide the funding,'" noted Patrick Lenz, CSU's assistant vice chancellor for budget development.

Because many CSU applicants had been rejected before the governor's transfer proposal was announced, the campuses were notifying previously rejected students of the option. However, only 3,800 of the guarantees were available, far fewer than the estimated number of eligible students who were rejected.

Some CSU campuses were, for the first time, unable to offer spaces to every qualified applicant. At CSU-Northridge, for example, only eligible students who live in the San Fernando Valley and designated surrounding areas were admitted outright. Students from other areas were placed on a

waiting list, with priority going to students whose hometown is not served by another CSU campus and students whose high schools traditionally send students to Northridge.

No room at the inn?

But even as UC and CSU campuses were notifying tens of thousands of students about the community college diversion program, the state's community colleges were lobbying for more money to support their existing pool of students. Many of the colleges had little interest in accommodating the additional students, especially without more funding.

"I don't know what seats these students from the university are going to sit in," said Howard Perdue, vice chancellor for enrollment management and student services at Peralta Community College District in the East Bay, which turned away 3,000 students last year. "Unless, of course, it's the students who constitute our first mission — students who can't get into the university. The basic-skills students, the immigrants, the students who need remedial work to get into the mainstream of the educational ladder, those are still our priority. We are not reassigning resources to increase the offer-

ings in calculus and fourth-year French."

Perdue fears that students who've been diverted from UC will out-manuever the community colleges' traditional students when it comes to signing up for classes. Even before registration began, campuses were hearing from those students.

As for Governor Schwarzenegger's notion of offering that group free tuition, "That idea is about as popular as leprosy," Perdue said. "We're going to charge them. Who pays the bill is nothing to us — the university, the state, whatever."

If large numbers of students do take advantage of the guarantees from UC and CSU, they could displace less well-prepared students at community colleges. They could also limit the number of students who can transfer through the ordinary route, which has grown increasingly competitive. This year, the UC system received a record 667 transfer applications from California community college students, a nearly 40 percent increase in two years. The influx of diverted students could hinder the goal of expanding those existing transfer opportunities.

"I don't know how any of these institutions are going to handle this,"

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UC Berkeley planned to absorb this year’s enrollment cuts mainly through attrition. Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Richard Black said the campus anticipates that higher tuition will cause some freshmen and new graduate students to turn down offers of admission and some existing students to not return to school.

But even though those estimates allowed the campus to admit 100 more California resident freshmen than last year, the overall freshman numbers included some that Berkeley Chancellor Bob Berdahl called “flat-out unacceptable”: 87 fewer African American students, 75 fewer Latino students, and 300 fewer low-income students. The campus is analyzing the reasons for those drops in a report due in July, according to education professor David Stern, who chairs a faculty admissions committee.

“It’s going to be as detached and scientific as we can make it,” said Stern. “It has to hold up to scrutiny that’s more strict than academic research.”

Others close to the campus were convinced that public accusations by Regents Chairman John J. Moores, who claimed UC Berkeley was discriminating against Asian Americans and favoring black and Latino students, may have had a chilling effect on admissions officers.

The battle with Moores foreshadows the coming struggle over how UC will revise its eligibility requirements. A California Postsecondary Education Commission study due out in late May was expected to show that more than 15 percent of the state’s high school graduates are eligible to attend UC. Since the Legislature has already shown its unwillingness to pay for

surplus students in the costly UC slots, the new question is how UC will further ration access if forced to return to the Master Plan goal of 12.5 percent.

However the institution resolves the eligibility dilemma, the university is clearly abandoning the language of “guaranteed” admission.

“What else in life is guaranteed?” said UC spokesman Brad Hayward, when asked whether the agreement to increase undergraduate enrollment by 5,000 would accommodate all eligible students.

One option on the table is to increase the portion of each high school’s students who automatically qualify to attend UC. Currently, 4 percent of students from each high school are considered eligible, but an admissions committee was looking at increasing that proportion to as high as 9 percent, even if it entailed lowering the percentage of students who qualify on a statewide basis to 9 percent. While many students who perform well within their own high school also qualify on statewide criteria, such a change would limit opportunities for students from the state’s highly competitive high schools where large percentages of students typically qualify to attend UC.

Fireworks ahead

Any change to the per-high-school percentage promised to spark fireworks, especially from families whose kids attend private schools and the state’s top-performing public schools. Those families have allies among the UC regents, such as Moores, who favor more attention to students’ SAT scores and are less enamored with the system’s new comprehensive review policy.

But pressure from legislators, especially in the Capitol’s ethnic cau-

ses, could strengthen the voices of those within the university who favor the equity formula. The dynamic is reminiscent of that which helped prod the university to adopt its current 4-percent formula back in 1998 to satisfy then-state Senator Teresa Hughes (D-Los Angeles), who was pushing to scrap statewide eligibility requirements and qualify all students on a per-high-school basis. This time, Senator Kevin Murray (D-Los Angeles), chair of the Black Caucus, has proposed amending the state constitution to require UC to accept the top 10 percent of students.

“To the extent that we have to cut, we have to think of new ways of apportioning that cut,” said Murray. “If people from these elite private schools get accepted at a much higher rate, and we’re in charge of the public schools, it is we who have done a disservice to the students at public schools. We have to make sure that the UC system is a public university and remains to serve the public and not to provide a subsidized education just for the elite.”

Since the outcome of that debate will cascade down through the educational system, it is bound to spark continued controversy.

“Access to education is becoming a scarce resource,” said Michael Shires, a public policy professor and higher education expert at Pepperdine University. “In the next 10 or 15 years, we need to focus our priorities for those expensive and scarce seats at the University of California. There needs to be a public dialogue if the public is paying the price.” 🏠

Pamela Burdman is a freelance writer from Berkeley and a former San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Send comments to comments@californiajournal.com