Changing University of California Admissions Practices: A Participant-Observer Perspective

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In this report, I will try to identify the underlying conflicts between the goals and the reality of changing University of California admissions practices from the perspective of a participant observer. A contrast with the British system of university admissions will be posed, and the steps taken to change the way tests are used in the University of California system will be examined from both technical and policy perspectives.

Background in Two Settings

On the day in February 2001 that Richard C. Atkinson gave his lecture raising questions about the utility of the SAT in the admissions policy of the University of California, I was in England, beginning a set of meetings intended to evaluate for the British government the quality and utility of their university admissions examinations. My thoughts, reactions, and recommendations have been naturally influenced by the juxtaposed tasks, each addressing a perceived key challenge on the path to admission to higher education and the benefits of a university degree.

Although both sets of processes, the California path and that in the United Kingdom, differ in many significant ways, they share a common goal—to assure that instruments and processes used in the admissions decision are functioning as intended, are of sufficient technical quality, and result in fair action, both in reality and as perceived by the public, students, educators, and parents.

Underneath, atop, and suffused through the narrow question of higher education admissions is the reality of educational reform that is still underway in both countries in the pre-collegiate educational systems. Both systems have placed a priority on raising performance results and have, to varying degrees, applied different sanctions and incentives to enhance accountability. Parental choice, for

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example, was an attribute of both systems, using a market model to draw parents and their children to successful schools and away from schools not making progress. Although the problem as formulated in California was focused on admission to the University of California, the link between changes in that process and changes in secondary school performance was palpable.

In both settings there were concerns about the distribution of access to higher education among minority students, whose numbers did not correspond to population statistics. In California, with its burgeoning numbers of Latino and Asian immigrant and first-generation families, the problem was more directly linked to the public schools and the dissatisfaction about the distribution of access. This issue rose in salience in geometric proportion to the rise in power of Latino members in the California legislature. (For instance, see www.ucaccord.org for an analysis for disparate access.) In the United Kingdom, the putative success of the reforms was changing the proportion of students (including those previously underrepresented) who were attempting and achieving success taking the "A level" examinations and being admitted to prestigious institutions. Both those in the higher education community and media writers were concerned that the tests and therefore the "standards" had dropped, since the pass rates were improving over time.

Testing for More Than One Purpose

From a technical perspective, the question is whether a test or testing system can be designed to optimize two sets of outcomes: (a) making fair and appropriate admissions decisions, and (b) linking the University testing requirements to productive learning that could in part be undertaken in the secondary schools. The use of a testing system for multiple purposes raises hackles among technical specialists, who rightly assert that the validity of the system is determined by how the results—for each purpose—are used. To optimize multiple uses of test results is a particularly challenging assignment. However, in the present world of policy and practice, a single examination often is used for multiple purposes. For example, in the No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation, test results are supposed to identify schools needing to make progress, help in identifying subgroups that need particular attention, guide teachers' instructional practices, and influence policy decisions about resources intended to improve performance. For the most part, these requirements have been greeted with few complaints about potential validity and more concern over the details of the procedures to be used in the new policy. Nonetheless, the melding of instructional certification (the learning of specific

outcomes) and the selection from a large pool of highly qualified individuals into a single system would have to overcome a series of important hurdles. Consider the following list.

1. There would need to be congruence between University entrance requirements, domains of student competency and skills, and those appropriately addressed by the secondary schools. This goal requires a procedure for determining the relationship between the sets of University and secondary school requirements. For the most part, both sets of expectations are framed far too generally to be compared.

2. There would need to be systematic preparation in the secondary schools designed to help students achieve the standards to help them be admitted to the University. This requirement has multiple implications, the most obvious of which is the controversial proposition that admissions examinations should tap school-acquired knowledge rather than world knowledge or general ability.

3. An obvious corollary is the need to prepare practicing and novice teachers in the subject matter competency that they need to be successful. Where the interest or money will be found for that task is as yet unknown.

4. There is still a tension about the degree to which "challenging" standards must mean academically oriented standards. In other words, is all education directed toward a UC admissions profile?

5. Tests would need to be developed, preferably connected to particular courses or courses of study, so that student opportunity to learn could be monitored (see the recommendations in *Raising Standards for American Education,* National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992).

Technical Studies and Real Policy Change

Despite these weighty concerns, a good deal of effort was expended in an attempt to disabuse the public and higher education university faculty of the idea that the SAT represents an implacable gold standard for university admissions. The analyses conducted by Geiser and Studley (2001) were designed to document the degree to which content-based tests (such as the SAT II examinations in subject matter) would serve as adequate admissions measures. The argument was almost wholly based on the idea that the SAT I and II examinations did not greatly differ in predictive validity. The analyses were conducted and reviewed with a look to who would "win" or do better and who would "lose" should the system be changed. While of doubtless great interest, such analyses assumed that behaviors, such as teaching and learning in secondary school, would remain the same under both

systems. In fact, the argument made by UC President Atkinson was that school offerings should shift (in the direction of systems such as those in England and Australia, or the International Baccalaureate program) so that students would be examined for admission to the University on material drawn from clearly delineated courses.

This spirit of the proposal, of course, threatened present notions of local control, both at a local board level and in the "academic freedom" of teachers in the classroom. It is easy to imagine that some believe that specifying *what* students should learn is tantamount to decreeing *how* they should learn. It is true that specificity of goals and prescriptive means have become a fact of elementary school policy in California. Yet, it was clear to me, perhaps because of my knowledge of the A level and Australian examination systems, that the goals of increased competence, equitable access, and productive effort would be best achieved by moving slowly toward a system that focused on measuring results tied to the curriculum.

There were at least three options available to California: (a) Begin the design of such a system; (b) adapt the extant Golden State Examinations (course-based examinations taken for endorsed diplomas) or the emerging Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) examinations (state assessments); (c) induce large-scale test producers to create the system for the state.

Criteria to be considered in making such a decision were cost, credibility among the higher education community, practicality, and the validity of the ensuing system. Let's assume all options further our opportunity to begin a new design, and thus the contrast is using California-specific material as opposed to more national examinations. A benefit of using existing tests is that this would allow the reduction of the high number of required tests for students. Such tests would also reflect California curricula. This strength would also lead to a deficiency—the parochial nature of the tests and the attendant difficulties raised for out-of-state students who wish to apply to UC. In addition, questions related to cost, capacity, and cycle time need to be considered.

In considering potential vendors for a "new" or more content-focused admissions test, UC began discussions with two concerns, the College Board, which has overseen the SAT examinations, and the American College Testing Program (ACT), which manages the ACT college admission tests. Representatives of both organizations made presentations intended to be responsive to the spirit of the

change. It was also clear that if a substantial shift occurred away from College Board products, there might well be a national trend. On the other hand, ACT presented an approach that was very consistent with many of the requirements of a new, curriculum-focused assessment, and they showed substantial evidence of using curricula in the formulation of their current assessments. But it also rapidly became apparent that ACT would be unlikely to compete unless there were development resources available to them.

Contrast this situation with the A level examinations, where three different "awarding bodies" (read test companies) compete for a school's business. Schools select the courses and perhaps the professional development needed for staff. Examinations are administered by different groups who are monitored by a government body, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA; see www.qca.org.uk). QCA set criteria for syllabi and tests. The testing groups also police themselves. Students who wish to apply, for example, to a mathematics or law university program meet with the relevant officers at the university and are told what examinations are required and about what grades (A or B, usually) they would need to attain to be admissible. The examinations are administered nationwide in the early summer, and results are provided in a 2-month cycle. Students matriculate the same year that they take the examinations.

There are a number of features of this system that would be difficult to translate to California, especially that teachers are the examination readers, a teacher may read papers from students in his or her own school, and a student's paper usually receives only one reading. The questions of reliability and technical merit are less addressed, and few studies of predictive validity are routinely conducted. This approach also makes the assumption that students know the area in which they wish to specialize well before they enter the university. The result is that the entire system pushes students toward more narrow, yet deeper, attention and places greater hurdles for them to overcome in order to rethink or change directions successfully.

The system in the United Kingdom does have characteristics that might be imported in a future reconsideration of the linkage of secondary school preparation and college admissions. For one thing, there is great care taken in selecting the questions and in identifying the framework of answers that would be acceptable when judging answers prepared by students. Those charged with the effort are individuals of great expertise, authority, and credibility among teachers and the

public. Furthermore, there is some evidence that scores are rising as a function of improved performance. Imagine the problem UC would have if the pool of qualified candidates were even greater than it is now.

If the testing system at UC undergoes modification as proposed, and adds a writing test and uses subject-matter-based SATs, there is still much evaluation work to be done. First, it would be important to study whether the system yields different distributions of student performance, and how distributions change over a number of years. For instance, how do students of other language backgrounds do on the examinations? Second, it would be important to evaluate how and the extent to which schools modify their curriculum in response to UC changes, or whether organizations offering test preparation simply modify their wares. Third, it would be desirable to see whether the institution of subject matter tests, writing examinations, and so forth improves the entering capabilities of students. Will there be fewer failures on the University placement examinations in writing and mathematics? Will students be able to make more rapid progress through their academic programs and greatly reduce parental costs? Will we have happy (or at least happier) professors? Will the University ratchet up its requirements because it is dealing with better prepared students?

Evaluation studies should be conducted of the consequences of the use of assessments, especially when different purposes are intended to be combined, granting the complexity of the political and economic settings in which education is placed. There are strong conceptual approaches available to create systems of measures that meet various needs, and simultaneously to give coherent signals to those participating in education. Richard Atkinson started on a wise and difficult path. UC faculty and administrators should recognize that the time will come for even more change, with the continuing goals of making our educational system stronger, fairer, and more effective. So we will plan for this future now, and await the time when budget pressures subside, further technical advances are made, costs are better controlled, and education is once again strongly at the top of our public policy agenda.

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