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Top 10 percent may hurt minorities, report says

By Melissa Mixon

An unpublished study, reported by the Chronicle of Higher Education, said black and Hispanic students from predominately minority schools are less likely to enroll in selective colleges such as the University of Texas at Austin.

The report, which examines Texas' top 10 percent law, was conducted by Marta Tienda, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, and Sunny Niu, a research associate at Princeton's Office of Population Research.

The report also stated that chances for minority students to make the top 10 percent cutoff are hurt if they are enrolled in racially integrated high schools.

The study also noted factors such as the economic conditions of students.

Troy Johnson, former president of the Texas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, said the top 10 percent rule should be just one tool used in recruiting more minority students.

Universities additionally need to provide cultural events and financial aid to minority students, Johnson said.

Since its adoption by the University in 1997, the top 10 percent rule has been called everything from "racially neutral" to "unfair."

The rule, which gives automatic acceptance to students ranked in the top 10 percent of their graduating high school class, was adopted after a 1996 court of appeals case made affirmative action in Texas illegal.

University of Texas System officials, including UT President Larry Faulkner and Board of Regents Chairman James Huffines, have publicly said changes should be made to the rule.

In 2004, 67 percent of students enrolled at the University were admitted under the top 10 percent rule.

Now, in a move to bring more diversity to campus, the University will once again consider race during its 2005 admissions.

Bruce Walker, UT vice provost and director of admissions, said the University will look at race, extra-curricular activities, standardized test scores and socioeconomic need, as well as class rank, when evaluating students for admissions.

Walker said he does not know if capping the top 10 percent rule, as some legislators

are asking, will help increase diversity, but he hopes using race in admissions will.

"We are trying to raise students' aspirations, and the message of the top 10 percent rule helps us do that," Walker said. "We can go into any school in the state and say if you are in the top 10 percent, you are automatically accepted."

State Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, said eliminating the top 10 percent rule would give students of lower socioeconomic status more of a chance to be accepted into top Texas schools and would make the admissions process fair.

"Right now we have one system that is based on your standing among your peers at high school," Wentworth said. "Your high school grades, which curriculum you took, whether it was minimum or advanced doesn't count, and anything extra you did doesn't count. Admissions officers should be unshackled and able to look at that."

House Bill 320, filed by Wentworth, would remove the top 10 percent law and replace it with an admissions process that would take into account test scores, extra curricular activities, class rank and financial need.

Others wanting changes to the top 10 percent rule have opted for less dramatic adoptions.

Under a bill by state Rep. Tony Goolsby, R-Dallas, only the top 5 percent of students would be automatically accepted into Texas universities.

"When we voted on it, the top 10 percent rule was needed because at the time, universities had done away with race as a factor," Goolsby said. "It worked so well that we don't need it as much, because we've gone back to using race as a factor."

State Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio said caps on the top 10 percent rule are "ludicrous."

"Caps are artificial," Van de Putte said. "They may mean something to UT, but UT explicitly cut its freshman class."

UT admissions policies OVER TIME:

* In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that race and ethnicity could be used as admissions factors.

* In 2004, 67 percent of students enrolled in the University of Texas were admitted under the top 10 percent rule.

* In 2005, The University of Texas will begin using race as an admissions factor.

* The University currently has:

Whites - 58.6 percent

Asian Americans - 14.3 percent

Hispanics - 13.4 percent

African American - 3.5 percent

Foreign - 8.8 percent

Unknown - 1.1 percent

Native American - 0.4 percent

* State Rep. Dan Branch, R-Dallas, filed a bill in February that would put a 50-percent cap on the number of students admitted to Texas universities under the top 10 percent rule.