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Lawmakers debate university admissions law

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By BRANDI GRISSOM / Associated Press

A law that guarantees college admission to students who rank in the top 10 percent of their high school class should be kept but improved, higher education officials told lawmakers Wednesday.

"It's very clear the top 10 percent plan has been successful in sustaining certain levels of diversity," said Raymund Paredes, Higher Education Coordinating Board commissioner.

The Senate Subcommittee on Higher Education heard testimony about how Texas' top 10 percent law impacts diversity in the state's public universities and what is needed to increase minority representation. The committee examined one bill that would abolish the top 10 percent law and others that would change it.

The university admissions law was adopted after a 1996 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision made affirmative action illegal in Texas college admissions. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed that decision, allowing universities to use race as one of many decision-making factors.

Administrators at the University of Texas at Austin have long called for change in the top 10 percent law. They say a more holistic approach would allow for accurate assessment of student qualifications and for a more well-rounded student body.

More than 60 percent of the 2004 UT Austin freshman class was admitted under the law, said UT Austin President Larry Faulkner. Within a few years, he said, all freshman slots will be filled with top 10 percent graduates.

"Students are not one-dimensional," Faulkner said. "The university needs room in its admissions decisions to consider criteria other than high school class ranking."

But getting rid of the law altogether isn't a good solution, Faulkner said. Allowing 50 percent of a freshman class to be top 10 percent admittees would provide university admissions officials needed flexibility, he said.

During the 2003 legislative session, Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, along with San Antonio Democrat Leticia Van de Putte, filibustered a bill that would have provided such a cap.

Rep. Geanie Morrison, R-Victoria, has filed the bill this year, but the proposal has not been offered in the Senate.

West, the subcommittee chairman, said the current law accomplishes its goal of increasing racial, ethnic and geographic diversity at large universities. His bill would keep the law but require students to take tougher courses to qualify for automatic admission.

The 2004 freshman class had nearly double the number of Hispanic and black students admitted in 1998, before the top 10 percent law was used, Paredes told the committee.

West said he worried change would diminish diversity.

Because UT Austin officials use race as a factor in admissions and employ aggressive minority outreach programs, Faulkner said, it is unlikely racial and ethnic diversity would diminish. It may be more difficult, he said, to ensure a range of students from different areas of the state.

Those who favor abolishing the law say it is unnecessary now that universities can use race in admissions decisions.

Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, whose bill would repeal the top 10 percent law, has said it unfairly gives an advantage to students who take easier courses simply to get a higher class ranking.

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