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On Education

Adjusting a Formula Devised for Diversity

By JOSEPH BERGER

AUSTIN, Tex.

After a federal appeals court barred Texas [from explicitly counting race in admissions to its colleges](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/national/usstatesterritoriesandpossessions/texas/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), the state struggled to find another way to diversify the student body. Nine years ago, it came up with an elegantly simple formula: all students whose grades ranked them in the top 10 percent of their high school classes would automatically be admitted to any campus, including the flagship here.

The formula took advantage of a fact that some Texans are less than proud of — the state's schools are so divided by race that a top 10 percent threshold would assure admission to many graduates of predominantly Hispanic and black high schools who once might have been overlooked. California and Florida use similar formulas.

Here in Texas, the 10 percent solution has worked reasonably well in achieving diversity without running into Supreme Court restrictions on affirmative action. Of the freshmen at the flagship campus here, 18.7 percent are Hispanic and 5.2 percent are black, roughly the same proportions as before the 1996 court ruling in Hopwood v. Texas.

But the formula has also had unintended consequences that the Texas Legislature is now wrestling with; it has become the tail that wagged the dog, university officials suggest. Seventy-one percent of the 6,864 Texans in the freshman class are top 10 percenters, compared with 41 percent in the first year the formula was used. That steady growth has frustrated college officials who have seen their flexibility to admit high school class presidents, high SAT scorers, science fair winners, immigrant strivers, artists and the like narrow.

“At some point you have to ask yourself, do you really want to admit your whole class on a single criteria,” said Bruce Walker, the admissions director at Austin. “It doesn't give you the opportunity to recognize other kinds of merit.”

The proportion of 10 percenters at Austin has grown as word has spread across the state that anyone in the top tenth of any school can get into a campus whose alumni include James Baker [, Laura Bush](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/james_a_iii_baker/index.html?inline=nyt-per) [, Michael Dell](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/laura_bush/index.html?inline=nyt-per), Denton Cooley and Bill Moyers [and that is tied for 13th among public universities in U.S. News & World Report rankings.](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/bill_moyers/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

But officials like Mr. Walker worry that they may not be getting as strong or as interesting a student body as they could assemble with finely tuned reviews of a larger pool of applicants who missed the 10 percent cut. Like painters composing a canvas, admissions officers like to have a rich palette of students to draw from, and they may want to attract, say, poets who fell short. The university also does not want to be seen as provincial.

“We want to compete in the big leagues,” said William Powers Jr., Austin's dapper, cigar-chewing president. “We want to be the best public university in the country, and that means getting the best students.”

THE sledgehammer bluntness of the 10 percent formula, signed into law by George W. Bush http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/george_w_bush/index.html?inline=nyt-per when he was governor, is based on an assumption that Texas high schools are roughly equal. Yet some offer 20 Advanced Placement courses and others none, and some boast teachers with doctorates and others are full of uncertified ones.

The 10 percenters have proved to be stalwart students; barely 1 percent are propped up with tutoring. But the formula has unleashed a certain amount of gamesmanship, with more than a few students choosing easier high school courses or schools to strengthen their chances for admission.

More important, the formula has meant that the university may neglect desirable black and Hispanic students, as well as white students, who attend lustrous high schools but may not finish in the top 10. Marcus Price, a black finance major, for example, graduated from the High School for Engineering Professions in Houston, a competitive magnet school, with a 3.4 grade point average that included three A.P. courses. But with so many college-bound students to compete with, he ranked only in the top 20th percentile.

“I thought it was funny that you could go to a less competitive school, score a total of 800 or 900 on your SATs and get into U.T. at Austin as long as you were in the top 10 percent,” said Mr. Price, who scored 1200 on his SATs.

He was fortunate that the university allows strong applicants who miss the plateau to spend a year at a satellite campus — in his case, San Antonio — and transfer to Austin if they achieve a 3.0 average.

But stories like Mr. Price’s explain why Mr. Powers wants no more than half a freshman class to be selected through a percentage formula. A bill to achieve his aim has been filed in the Legislature. It would let admissions officers tinker with the makeup of a larger portion of the entering class, though it might mean that only the top 6 or 7 percent of high school senior classes would automatically be admitted.

BUT the bill faces the formidable opposition of Royce West, a senator from Dallas who, as chairman of the Senate’s higher education subcommittee, twice blocked efforts to tinker with the 10 percent formula.

“I don’t want to see us do away with a system that is working, producing the greatest geographic and ethnic diversity in the history of the University of Texas http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/university_of_texas/index.html?inline=nyt-org without sacrificing academic quality,” said Mr. West, who is black.

Mr. West also argued that students should not be penalized because their parents could not afford housing in affluent areas with top-flight schools.

“Children don’t have control over the environment they find themselves in,” he said. “What they have control over is their work ethic and the amount of work they can put in into getting into the top 10 percent.”

Mr. West may not be as formidable as he once was — he was not reappointed as chairman — but officials here know he will be adept at horse trading with unexpected allies — white and Hispanic legislators from rural districts who are tickled by how many long-bypassed constituents are now attending Austin.

Even some supporters of Mr. Powers’s cap worry that the lack of a clear 10 percent goal to shoot for will weaken incentives to work hard in high school. It is a reasonable worry. But the trade-off is that an increase in wiggle room could create freshman classes that match the vibrancy of those at top colleges, almost all of which examine applications individually.

If the Legislature revises the formula, top-ranked students will still be admitted, but fewer of them. And Mr. Walker, the admissions director, is confident that he can achieve diversity, in part because a 2003 Supreme Court ruling in two University of Michigan http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/university_of_michigan/index.html?in

[line=nyt-org](#)> cases allows race as a criterion in selecting a class as long as there is not an ironclad racial point system.

The fact that the Legislature demands diversity may offer a strong chance that he will deliver.

Email: joeberg@nytimes.com