

# UT calls for limiting top 10 percent admissions

## A cap on 1997 law would make it easier to boost racial and ethnic diversity, Powers tells lawmakers.

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Ten years ago, the state Legislature passed and then-Gov. George W. Bush signed a measure that was intended to boost minority enrollment at public universities, especially the University of Texas.

Now, critics of the law, including the university itself, say its scope needs to be limited to make additional progress toward the goal. But leaders of some civil rights and minority organizations don't buy that argument and want the law to stand.

At issue is the law granting Texas students in the top 10 percent of their graduating class automatic admission to any public university in the state. UT increasingly is the school of choice, with top 10 percent students now making up 71 percent of its freshmen from Texas high schools.

UT officials have argued for several years that the law doesn't leave enough room to admit, for example, a standout math student who might have fallen short of the top 10 percent benchmark because he bombed a high school English class or a superb flute player whose academic skills don't hit the same high notes.

UT officials are still making those arguments. But at a House Higher Education Committee hearing on Monday, UT President William Powers Jr. added that limiting the scope of the automatic admission law to 40 or 50 percent of the freshman class would give the university more flexibility to recruit students, including minority students. UT considers race and ethnicity among other factors in deciding whether to admit students who do not qualify for automatic admission.

One in four top 10 percent freshmen at UT is African American or Hispanic, according to university records. One in five freshmen who did not gain automatic admission is African American or Hispanic.

"This is a tremendously important priority at the University of Texas," Powers said of the push to increase diversity.

The automatic admission law has hardly been a resounding success in boosting the number of minority students. African American enrollment at UT is up just marginally since the law was passed, from 3.3 percent of the student body in fall 1998 to 3.9 percent in fall 2006. Hispanic enrollment went from 12.2 percent to 15 percent during that period.

About a dozen bills concerning automatic admission have been filed. Some would repeal it, some would limit it, and some would essentially preserve the status quo.

Two years ago, the House approved a bill limiting the automatic admission program, but the Senate refused to sign on.

Under a proposal by Rep. Geanie Morrison, R-Victoria, who is chairwoman of the House panel, a university would not have to fill more than half of its complement of Texas students with top 10 percent graduates.

Like Powers, she argued that this would ultimately increase diversity.

Texas A&M University Interim President Eddie Davis called a 50 percent cap "reasonable." Top 10 percent students constitute just under half of A&M's freshmen from Texas high schools. Top 10 percent students aren't straining capacity at the more than 30 other public colleges in the state.

Luis Figueroa, a legislative staff attorney with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, urged lawmakers to leave the law alone, asserting that it sends a simple but important message to high school students: If you rank in the top tenth of your class, your admission to college is guaranteed.

"There's no better merit system than the top 10 percent plan," Figueroa said.

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