

Access Provisions of the California Master Plan for Higher Education

The 1960 Master Plan provided that UC was to “select from” the top one-eighth (12.5%) of the high school graduating class and CSU was to “select from” the top one-third (33.3%) of the high school graduating class. The California Community Colleges were to admit any student capable of benefiting from instruction.¹ The Master Plan left the definition of the top one-third and top one-eighth to the respective systems.

Another goal of this recommendation, coupled with the recommendation that UC and CSU reserve 60 percent of undergraduate slots for upper division students, was to divert 50,000 students from UC and CSU to the community colleges.² Thus, it was clear that the 1960 Master Plan viewed the 12.5% target as a limitation on enrollment—12.5% was a ceiling, reducing from the 1959 level of approximately 15 percent.

While this particular provision was not enacted into statute, the Regents and the State Board of Education unanimously approved the Master Plan recommendations in principle in December 1959. In addition, the faculty implemented new admission standards to take effect for 1962 (the time delay allowed for phasing in the higher standards) designed to reduce the eligible pool to 12.5 percent.

Despite the 1960 language stating that UC and CSU were to “select from” the eligible pools, subsequent UC and CSU practice and Master Plan policy evolved to provide that *all* California residents in the top one-eighth or top one-third of the statewide public high school graduating class who apply on time would be offered a place somewhere in the UC or CSU system, respectively, though not necessarily at the campus or in the major of first choice. UC policy documents show this to be the practice even in the 1960s and it was the general understanding in the 1970s and 1980s.

The last two legislative reviews of the Master Plan made the promise or guarantee of access to all eligible students explicit. The 1989 Joint Legislative Committee (co-chairs Senator Hart and Assembly Member Vasconcellos) report stated:

*The University of California shall guarantee admission as a first-time freshman to every student who ranks among the top one-eighth of all California public high school graduates, with graduates of private and out-of-state secondary schools held to at least equivalent levels.*³

UC negotiated extensively with the Legislature during this 1985 to 1989 Master Plan review. In fact, the Regents adopted a new admissions policy that referenced the Master Plan access commitment prior to the final legislative report in March 1989. At its May 20, 1988 meeting the Regents adopted a “University of California Policy on Undergraduate Admissions” that stated:

The undergraduate admissions policy of the University of California is guided by the University’s commitment to serve the people of California and the needs of the state, within the framework of the California Master Plan for Higher Education.

The entrance requirements established by the University follow the guidelines set forth in the Master Plan, which requires that the top one-eighth of the state's high school graduates, as well as those transfer students who have successfully completed specified college work, be eligible for the admission to the University of California. These requirements are designed to ensure that all eligible students are adequately prepared for University-level work.

Mindful of its mission as a public institution, the University of California has an historic commitment to provide places within the University for all eligible applicants who are residents of California.

In 2002, UC participated in deliberations of the latest joint legislative committee developing a new Master Plan for Education, including K-12 education. Senator Dede Alpert chaired that joint committee. The draft report, written by legislative staff, recommended that UC and CSU “continue selecting . . . freshman students from among” their eligibility pools. President Atkinson wrote to Senator Alpert and appeared before the Joint Committee presenting UC’s position that we should instead continue the practice of ensuring access to *all* eligible students who desire to attend.⁴

Senator Alpert and the other members of the Joint Committee responded that they did not intend to change that aspect of the Master Plan and they amended that recommendation to be consistent with the 1989 report.

The adopted 2002 Joint Legislative Committee report now reads:

Recommendation 12. The California State University and University of California systems should continue to adhere to the policy of guaranteeing that all students who apply for freshman admission and who are eligible to attend (students within the top one-third, in the case of California State University applicants, and the top one-eighth, in the case of University of California applicants) are offered admission to the system(s) for which they are eligible and have applied. Community colleges should continue to be open to all high school graduates and adults who can benefit from postsecondary instruction.⁵

Conclusion. While all of the Master Plan provisions are not in statute, UC and the state have both adopted the provisions relating to access: that the top 12.5 percent of the public high school graduating class be eligible to attend UC and that all eligible California students have the opportunity to attend, through not necessarily at the campus or in the major of choice. The 12.5 percent target has always been intended as a ceiling not a floor, but it still is a target. Changes in high school student bodies, student behavior, content of required examinations, and numerous other factors make the setting of the target as much an art as a science. There, too, has always been the practice that new requirements were to be phased in over time to provide students timely notice of these standards and an opportunity to meet them.

Notes

1. 1960 Master Plan language for UC and CSU:

“It is recommended that:

1. In order to raise materially standards for admission to the lower division, the state colleges select first-time freshmen from the top one-third (33 1/3 per cent) and the University from the top one-eighth (12 1/2 percent) of all graduates of California public high schools with ... [g]raduates of private and out-of-state secondary schools to be held to equivalent levels.”

[*A Master Plan for Higher Education in California*, Sacramento, 1960, pp. 73-74.]

2. Footnote from 1960 Master Plan on diversion to the community colleges:

“It is estimated that this recommendation [60:40 ratio] would result in the transfer of some 40,000 lower division students to the junior colleges by 1975. It is expected that the recommendation to select state college students from the upper 33 1/3 per cent of all public high school graduates and the University from the upper 12 1/2 percent, together with the recommendation that all ‘limited’ students be required to meet regular admission requirements, will make up another 10,000.”

[*A Master Plan for Higher Education in California*, Sacramento, 1960, footnote 7, p. 6.]

3. *California Faces... California's Future*, Joint Committee for Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, Sacramento, March 1989, p.25.

4. Excerpt from President Atkinson’s letter to Senator Alpert on July 2, 2002, pp. 2-3:

“Access to a public college and university education should remain an entitlement.

Recommendation 13 states that UC and CSU should continue to select freshman students from *among* the top one-eighth and one-third of the high school graduating class, respectively. The University requests that you **amend** this language to reflect existing Master Plan for Higher Education policy that guarantees access to all students who apply from these eligibility pools.”

“While the language in the 1960 Master Plan stated that UC and CSU were to select *from* these pools, the state and the higher education segments have always interpreted this provision as an entitlement. It is the heart of what the California public understands as the Master Plan. That is, if a student works hard enough to be included in one of these eligibility pools, that student will be *guaranteed* a space somewhere in the respective system. Since 1960, even under severe budgetary constraints, UC and CSU have admitted and offered a place to every California high school student who applies on time and is eligible, and the California Community Colleges have offered places to all high school graduates and adults who wish to attend. This has been possible because, with very few exceptions, the state has committed to funding a place for all eligible students every year since 1960. This guarantee of admission to the top one-third and one-eighth was a key recommendation agreed to in the 1989 Joint Committee Master Plan report.”

5. *The California Master Plan for Education*, Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education, Sacramento, 2002, p.40.