

# History of UC Eligibility

## Background

From the inception of the University of California, the purpose of University admission policies has been to create an academically excellent institution while pursuing egalitarian and socially responsible goals required of a public institution. Together, these principles of excellence and access provide opportunities for socioeconomic mobility and personal self-fulfillment for the individual student, and they also serve the needs of the state.

The 1868 Organic Act passed by the California legislature provided the charter for the University, and directed The Regents to, among other things, set the “moral and intellectual qualifications of applicants for admission.”<sup>1</sup> The Regents, in turn, looked to the faculty for their expertise on issues pertaining to educational policy, including the academic qualifications necessary for admission. Since 1884, and under the Standing Orders of The Regents, the Academic Senate has been the primary University entity with the direct charge to set undergraduate admissions policies in all its aspects. In 1920, the Academic Senate established the Board of Admissions (which became the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools, “BOARS”, in 1939).

Unlike most land-grant universities and colleges that, bowing to populist demands, were open to virtually anyone who applied, UC adopted admissions policies that were relatively selective from the beginning. Admission standards set by University faculty placed value on the completion of specific high school course requirements. In addition, in lieu of accreditation standards (adopted in 1963), the written recommendation of the high school principal served as another criterion for admission. Further, recognizing the large physical size of the state and the distribution of its population, geographic representation became a criterion in admission policy: “‘It shall be the duty of The Regents,’ as stated in the 1868 Act, ‘according to population, to so apportion the representation of students, when necessary, that all portions of the State shall enjoy equal privilege therein.’”<sup>2</sup> Educational opportunity was thus defined not only in economic terms, but also by geographic representation so that all Californians, in theory, would have a chance to attend the University. Admission policies also provided alternative methods for admission, such as admission by exception.

By the late 1950s, faced with projections of dramatic increases in student enrollment demand over the next two decades, University of California officials engaged in negotiations with other members of the state’s higher education community on how to maintain California’s promise of educational opportunity. The result was the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglass, John A. (1997). “*Setting the Conditions of Undergraduate Admissions: The Role of University of California Faculty in Policy and Process*” (a report to the Task Force on Governance, University of California Academic Senate).

<sup>2</sup> As stated in Douglass (ibid.).

## **Admissions Policy and the 1960 Master Plan**

Among the plan's most important recommendations were those regarding admission policies among public institutions. The intent of this plan was to reduce the overall cost of expanding public higher education, while not just maintaining but also dramatically expanding access. One key Master Plan mechanism to achieve this enhanced access was to reduce the percentage of high school students eligible to attend the University (UC) and the State College (now CSU) system as *freshmen* and shift those students to community colleges for their freshman and sophomore years. Thus, the admissions policy would become a regulatory mechanism to save the state money, and in the process, to provide for the orderly expansion of California public postsecondary institutions.

The drafters of the Master Plan sought to redirect a portion of the coming wave of students from UC and CSU to the community colleges, giving them the right to transfer back in their junior year. They had completed studies showing that current UC and CSU admissions standards were qualifying about 15 percent of the public high school graduating class for UC and about 50 percent for CSU. Thus, they recommended raising standards for admission at UC and CSU, such that CSU would draw from the top one-third (33.3 percent) and UC would draw from the top one-eighth (12.5 percent) of public high school graduates. Community colleges would remain open-access institutions but would have a greater role in ensuring transfer to the four-year institutions.

For its part, UC proceeded to raise its admissions standards at the freshman level, with the purpose of reducing its eligibility pool from approximately the top 15 percent to 12.5 percent of public high school graduates, and the state colleges curtailed their pool from approximately 50 percent to 33.3 percent of public high school graduates. These pools have come to be called the "eligibility pools."

Former UC President Clark Kerr, one of the architects of the Master Plan, has written, "The vision [of the Master Plan] was to serve an egalitarian democracy, a technocratic economy, and a meritocratic society."<sup>3</sup> In combining a vision of opportunity for all with clear academic standards that any student with ambition might achieve, the Master Plan served these goals. The Master Plan also built effectively on the past; it was consistent with values articulated in the 1868 Organic Act and subsequent University policies that emphasized the importance of both academic achievement and access.

### **The Eligibility Construct**

Although the Master Plan has been revised and re-affirmed several times since 1960, the eligibility policy has withstood the test of time. UC's eligibility criteria provide the following benefits to prospective students, schools, and the state:

1. To signal to students how they should prepare for the University. They establish clear academic standards for students with the promise of access for

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<sup>3</sup> Kerr, Clark. (2001). *The Gold and the Blue: A Personal Memoir of the University of California, 1949-1967*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 186.

those who meet the standards. Admission to the University is available to every student in the state who meets prescribed standards.

2. To signal to schools the importance of providing a strong academic curriculum. The eligibility criteria serve to set clear, consistent academic standards – sending a strong message to schools regarding the importance of academic preparation and how preparation is tied to both admission and future academic success at the University.
3. To provide a standard for UC to identify the top 12.5 percent of California high school students. The eligibility construct defines a specific pool of students, thus functioning as the regulatory mechanism, or rationing tool, in support of Master Plan requirements. More recently, as the number of qualified applicants applying for admission to specific campuses has exceeded the new student enrollment capacity at these campuses, the eligibility standard has been augmented by campus selection processes that serve to allocate a highly qualified pool of applicants to a finite number of available spaces on each campus.

In addition to the eligibility policy, the Master Plan also stipulated or inferred guidelines that continue to influence University admissions policies.

*Eligibility as an entitlement.* Under the 1960 Master Plan, the University of California was to select from among the top 12.5 percent of high school graduates (the method by which this would occur was left to the University to determine). That provision, however, was soon interpreted as a promise to all eligible students. As early as the 1970s, the University informed the legislature that it had put procedures in place to ensure that all qualified students were accommodated, though not necessarily at their campus or major of choice. It was not until 1988 that The Regents provided a formal statement articulating a moral responsibility to provide a space for all students who, as defined by UC, fell within the top 12.5 percent of high school graduates:

*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.*

This was further defined by changes made to the Master Plan in 1989 where the concept of a guarantee was articulated:

*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.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> 1989 Joint Master Plan Committee report

***Freshmen eligibility linked to community college transfer eligibility and the 40:60 ratio.*** The Master Plan set a goal of increasing access to higher education by redirecting a fraction of lower-division enrollment from UC and CSU to the California community colleges; this goal was premised on an assured route to the B.A. degree for such students. Later iterations of the Master Plan gave priority in admission to resident California community college students (over freshmen). To provide places for all such transfer students, the Master Plan also states that the University should have a ratio of lower-division to upper-division students of 40 percent to 60 percent. The 1989 Master Plan review promoted the concept of “dual entitlement”– that UC needed to attain the 60 percent upper division ratio by accepting more transfer students rather than by turning away eligible freshmen.

### **The Eligibility Index**

In 1966, BOARS reported to the Academic Assembly that a 1965 eligibility survey conducted by the California Council for Higher Education – a state agency created under Master Plan legislation and today renamed the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) – estimated that the University was drawing from the top 14.6 percent of students eligible for UC. BOARS advocated the SAT (or ACT) and three SAT achievement tests as a means to shift “relatively easily” the eligibility pool back down to 12.5 percent.<sup>5</sup> Thus, beginning in Fall 1968, all freshman applicants to the University were required to submit standardized examination scores to fulfill eligibility requirements.

BOARS developed an adjustable formula for determining eligibility based on a combination of test scores and grade point average. While the introduction of standardized tests in an eligibility index represented a scientific approach to assessing academic potential, the creation of an index also had the effect of reducing the importance of coursework and grade point average in determining UC eligibility. Unlike the curricular and scholarship requirements that were the foundation of UC admissions policy from the beginning, and which were measures of academic promise, the use of admissions tests and the creation of an eligibility index were tools to manage the surge in enrollment demand.

The presence of an index also de-emphasized selection criteria such as economic hardship and geographic representation that had characterized previous admissions practices. Inherent in the former policy was the promise of a wide range of students applying to the University and gaining admission based on courses completed, grades earned, and the recommendation of their high school principal. With the implementation of an eligibility index, admissions criteria to the University became both more standardized and less dynamic (when viewed from the broader access perspective).

Over the next two decades, the freshman eligibility criteria were revised a number of times [see chronology], to include the addition of specific academic coursework as well as changes to the eligibility index. In response to the outcomes of the most recent CPEC

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<sup>5</sup> Douglass (ibid).

eligibility study (1996), the eligibility index was most recently revised for the freshman class entering the University in 2001.

The eligibility index, along with course requirements, forms the cornerstone of the University's contemporary eligibility policy. Additional paths to freshman eligibility include Eligibility by Examination Alone and Eligibility in the Local Context, the latter effective for the fall 2001 entering class.

### **How Selection Differs from Eligibility**

By UC and state policy, the University is to provide a place for all California resident applicants who meet the eligibility requirements. In recent years, meeting the minimum eligibility requirement has often not been enough to gain admission to many UC campuses and programs. If the number of UC-eligible applicants exceeds the spaces available for a particular campus or major, the campus uses criteria that exceed the eligibility requirement to select students. These criteria are contained in the *Guidelines for Implementation Policy on Comprehensive Review*.

If the eligibility policy provides a mechanism for rationing spaces within UC as a whole, the selection criteria are a mechanism for allocating spaces at individual campuses, taking into account multiple goals including a broad definition of merit and recognition that the quality of educational opportunities available to all students in the state is not equal. While the eligibility index utilizes a limited set of criteria and is highly quantitative and therefore predictable, current selection guidelines call for a careful, thorough, and qualitative review of each applicant's academic and personal information. In this way, the comprehensive review policy is designed to identify excellence and achievement, recognizing the individual circumstances of each student.