

Policy Foundation and Historical Development of UC Eligibility Requirements

Policy Foundation

- Beginning with its charter in the 1868 Organic Act, UC was conceived of as a selective institution, admitting only those students who could be expected to successfully complete a degree, and as an egalitarian one, actively seeking students from all parts of the state and admitting women to its earliest classes on an equal footing with men.
- Also in the Organic Act, UC was charged as the accrediting agency for high schools, establishing its critical role in the identification of an appropriate college preparatory curriculum and the certification of the quality of courses within that curriculum.
- Students were originally identified for admission based on oral interviews with faculty. In 1884, The Regents recognized the authority of the Academic Senate to set admission policy. In 1939, the Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS) was established upon the merger of two predecessor committees.
- Throughout the University's history, its promulgation of curricular requirements (which evolved by the 1930s into the predecessor to the current "a-g" requirements) and certification of college preparatory courses that meet those requirements have served to set consistent and clear standards for California high schools about the minimum academic preparation needed for college-bound students.
- Together, the University's set of required courses and the "scholarship requirement" that students achieve a minimum grade point average (GPA) in these courses, have functioned as a "road map" to students aspiring to attend UC and, since the 1960s, a guarantee of admission to those who meet the threshold requirements. Throughout the University's history, eligibility has been based entirely on academic qualifications generally expressed in clear quantitative standards.
- At the same time that the University's criteria have provided a "bright line" establishing who was eligible for UC and who was not, the faculty as early as 1884 recognized the need to admit students in exception to these standards, in order to provide opportunity for talented students from throughout the state who might not have had access to a high-quality college preparatory curriculum, but showed academic promise. At different points in UC history, these alternate paths have included admission upon recommendation of the high school principal, admission for students ranking in the top ten percent of their high school class (discontinued in 1962), and admission for students who scored very high on various admission tests.

Historical Development of Eligibility Requirements: 1960 – 1996

- In 1960, the Master Plan for Higher Education added an additional function for the University's freshman eligibility requirements: rationing freshman access to the University to meet the Plan's newly enunciated goal that UC should draw students from the top 12.5 percent of California's public high school graduates (as well as equivalently qualified private high school graduates).
- Beginning in the late 1950's and continuing through the 1970's, studies conducted by the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) and its predecessor agencies consistently found that roughly 15 percent of California's public high school graduates met UC's eligibility criteria. In response to these studies, BOARS tightened eligibility requirements by:
 - eliminating many "alternative" paths in 1962;
 - requiring all students to submit scores from the SAT I or ACT and three "achievement tests" (now known as the SAT II's) in 1968, and
 - establishing the UC eligibility index in 1979.

In 1979, the minimum GPA in college preparatory courses for UC entrance was 2.78, no minimum SAT I/ACT score was required for applicants with a GPA of 3.3 or higher, and scores from the SAT II's were not considered in the index.

- CPEC, in its eligibility studies of 1983 and 1986, identified a new category of high school graduates: students who were "potentially eligible" by virtue of the fact that they had met the University's curricular and scholarship requirements, although they had not completed the full test pattern. This definition of eligibility allowed the University to avoid relaxing academic standards despite the fact that only 7 percent of graduates in 1983 and 9.1 percent in 1986 met the full pattern of existing requirements. The policy rationale for including the potentially eligible in UC's eligibility pool was grounded in admission practice at the time: during the 1980s, admissions officers on six of the University's eight undergraduate campuses admitted significant numbers of applicants on a conditional basis, working with them (sometimes throughout the summer prior to their enrollment) to ensure that they completed the testing requirement and any other deficiencies so as to be fully eligible at the time of enrollment.
- By the late 1980s, largely in response to increased demand, the practice of conditionally admitting "potentially eligible" applicants had ended on most UC campuses. Reflecting this change in practice, CPEC in its 1990 Eligibility Study reverted to its original definition of eligibility (which excluded the "potentially eligible"). Using this definition, CPEC found 12.3 percent of 1990 graduates were eligible.

To ensure academic quality, BOARS during the 1990s raised the minimum GPA in the eligibility index to 2.82 and added requirements in math, science, and elective courses. In 1997, CPEC's Eligibility Study of California's 1996 graduates found that only 11.1 percent of California's public high school graduates met UC's eligibility requirements.

Eligibility Policy Development (1997 to present) and Current Characteristics of the Eligibility Pool

- Following its review of the 1996 study, and based on studies that demonstrated that the SAT I was a relatively weaker predictor of academic performance in the freshman year, BOARS added SAT II scores to the eligibility index and weighted them twice as heavily as SAT I/ACT scores. Requiring SAT II scores of all eligible applicants reduced confusion over the existence of a “potentially eligible” pool because it was no longer possible for students to meet the requirements of the eligibility index without presenting scores on the SAT II. These changes and the overall findings of the 1996 Eligibility Study were discussed with The Regents at three Board meetings in 1998 and 1999.
- To respond to the 1996 CPEC Eligibility Study finding that only 11.1 percent of California’s public high school graduates met UC’s eligibility requirements, UC was faced with a need to expand the eligibility pool. Rather than relaxing its course, scholarship, or testing requirements, BOARS proposed a new “path” to eligibility: Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC), which identified the top four percent of graduates in every public and accredited private high school in California, based on grades earned in a-g courses taken through the end of the 11th grade. ELC was adopted by The Regents in 1999. Subsequent studies have shown that virtually all of the students identified as ELC-eligible have also earned the grades and test scores necessary to achieve eligibility in the statewide context.
- Studies of eligible students admitted to the University in recent years indicate that the majority of eligible applicants substantially exceed minimum eligibility requirements and that students are graduating from UC at higher rates than at any time in the University’s history.
- In July 2003, following extensive study on the part of BOARS and approval by The Regents, UC adopted a new testing policy covering use of new admissions tests being developed now by ACT, Inc. and the College Board, as well as broader curricular coverage in the pattern of five test scores applicants must submit. In doing so, BOARS tied the testing requirement more closely to the fundamental purpose the eligibility requirements have traditionally served: to enunciate standards for college preparation and communicate these standards to students and high schools. These requirements will take effect for students entering in the Fall 2006 term. BOARS has recommended reweighting of the individual components of the test portion of the academic index but will not develop a new index until additional data on the new tests are available. BOARS has recommended that this work be done in concert with the development of revised criteria, if necessary, in response to the 2003 eligibility study, so as to avoid the confusion for students, parents, and schools associated with changing requirements multiple times.

- A CPEC study of eligibility rates for 2003 California public high school graduates is due to be completed in spring 2004. Following traditional practice, BOARS over the coming academic year will review the findings of this study, identify potential changes needed to the eligibility criteria, develop recommendations, and present these for approval to the Board. In order to give students and high schools adequate notice, these requirements would be phased in over the coming years.