

House bill would cap automatic university admissions

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AUSTIN - Graduating in the top 10 percent would no longer guarantee high school students a spot at the University of Texas at Austin under a bill House lawmakers tentatively approved Wednesday.

"The impact of using a single admission criteria policy has become problematic," said Rep. Geanie Morrison, R-Victoria, who sponsored the new legislation. The bill was approved 75-69 in a recorded vote.

It would require universities to only accept 50 percent of their freshman classes under an admissions law that gives automatic acceptance to students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class. Priority would be given to students who complete the advanced high school curriculum.

"We want our students to achieve excellence," Morrison said. "We don't want our students going for a GPA and that is their only goal, and that is the problem."

Opponents of the proposed cap said the 1996 law is doing what was intended - increasing diversity and nurturing academic success at Texas schools.

"Why does it need fixing if it works?" asked Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston.

The top 10 percent law was adopted after a 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision made affirmative action illegal in Texas college admissions. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed that decision, allowing universities to use race as one of many decision-making factors.

The current law primarily affects the state's flagship universities - UT-Austin and Texas A&M University in College Station - where enrollment is most selective.

Administrators at UT-Austin have long called for change in the top 10 percent law, saying it prohibits admissions officials from considering all of a student's qualifications.

More than 70 percent of the fall 2005 UT-Austin freshman class was admitted under the law. At Texas A&M, about 47 percent of 2004 freshmen class were top 10 percent graduates.

Under Morrison's proposal, if the number of applicants who graduated in the top 10 percent of their high school class exceeds 50 percent of the freshman spots available, the university would first admit those who took the advanced curriculum. Remaining spots in the 50 percent would be filled according to class rank.

The other half of the freshman class would be admitted based on examination of their overall academic and social background. UT-Austin also considers race in admissions decisions, while Texas A&M does not.

The cap would first be used during the 2006-2007 admissions process.

Presidents of both UT-Austin and Texas A&M have supported a limit on the number of top 10 percent students they must admit.

"We are losing some exceptional students because they are not able to be considered on a holistic review," Morrison said.

Critics cited increased ethnic and geographic diversity at the state's largest universities under the top 10 percent law. Those students are also outperforming their peers both in grades and in graduation rates, they said.

Rep. Mike Villarreal, D-San Antonio, said UT-Austin created its own problem with the high level of top 10 percent admittees there when it decreased the size of its freshman classes starting in 2002.

He suggested the school, which is one of the world's largest with nearly 50,000 students, should reverse that policy.

"We're being asked to accept the wrong cure for the wrong diagnosis," Villarreal said. "We're being asked to treat a headache with bloodletting."

Dutton called UT-Austin officials pressing for the cap disingenuous. He questioned why recruiters can find students of color who are athletically talented all over the state, but they don't go to those places to find academically successful students.

"The University of Texas wants to be an all-white university," Dutton said. "... I think they are trying to give us the middle finger."

Last week, the Senate approved a bill that would keep the law intact and would require that top 10 students take the recommended or advanced high school curriculum to be automatically admitted.

A proposal that would have added a 50-percent cap to the Senate bill was rejected.

In 2003, Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, and Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, filibustered a bill that prescribed a cap on top 10 admissions.

After a final vote, Morrison's bill would move to the Senate.

The Top 10 percent cap bill is HB2330

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