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Top 10 percent law vital for UT

By Katie Shepherd and Dominique Cambou

This Wednesday, two radically opposing views on the top 10 percent rule will be brought to the table at the Texas Legislative Sub-committee of Higher Education hearing - one aims to keep it, the other to eliminate it. UT's Student Government plans to lobby in favor of capping top 10. All attempts to fix, retain or do away with top 10 avoid the real issue: the gross disparity in quality of education between Texas' institutions of higher learning.

Lost in the debate are the voices of students who understand the resounding success of a law that admits qualified students from around the state based on their performance in high school without any racial or economic bias. Texans realize the underlying fairness of top 10; in a poll conducted by Scripps Howard, 82 percent of Texans say they support the top 10 law as it stands. For the first time in history, Texas has a law that promotes both racial diversity and brings in students from underrepresented regions of the state.

Like all policy attempts to correct social inequalities, top 10 is imperfect. Critics of top 10 have argued that the law bars qualified students from getting into UT. But the fear that UT's freshmen class will consist of only top 10 students is unfounded. Last year, according to the UT admissions office, the number of students admitted through top 10 actually decreased by 4 percent, suggesting that the numbers may be leveling out.

Sen. Royce West, chairman of the Subcommittee on Higher Education, said, "Since top 10 is merit-based, any student can take advantage of it because it promotes not only racial diversity but geographic diversity."

Top 10 is certainly merit-based. It is also a better determinant than SAT scores of a student's potential success in college. According to a study conducted by the UT admissions office, the students getting in under top 10 earn higher GPAs and exhibit higher retention rates than other students. In addition, because the SAT is socio-economically biased, the top-10 plan, which disregards SAT scores, promotes greater equality in the assessment of high school applicants.

Geographic diversity has surged since top 10 was implemented, and studies also show increases in minority populations at UT. According to studies conducted by the UT admissions office, the number of high schools represented in the freshman class has increased by about 200 schools since top 10 was introduced. According to the studies, due to the top-10 percent law, the Hispanic population at UT has grown by 4 percent. Although Hispanics are the only minority population that has grown at UT, African-Americans are benefiting from top 10 acceptance to UT. While only 50 percent of African-American students were admitted through affirmative action in 1996, 75 percent were admitted through top 10 in 2003. If a law capping top 10

passes during this legislative session, the results would be detrimental and immediate.

Top 10 does work, but only to the extent that it provides for geographic diversity and sustains minority populations at near pre-top 10 levels here at UT's flagship campus.

If Texas is serious about both providing top-tier education to all qualified students and promoting diversity, then eliminating top 10 is counterproductive.

If the Legislature is afraid that those admitted through top 10 will dominate the student population at UT-Austin, then it should work to improve the other campuses in the UT System. By attacking top 10, the Legislature is dodging the issue of funding and quality disparities between university campuses in Texas.

Students who support top 10 are urged to come out to the Capitol on Wednesday at 9 a.m. and let their legislators have it. With a little effort we can save this effective and forward-thinking law because, as they say, "We're Texas."

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