

Texas' 10-Percent Plan: the Truth Behind the Numbers

By MARTA TIENDA and SUNNY NIU

Now that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the Constitution permits colleges to have race-conscious admissions policies, many people in Texas are calling for the Legislature to rescind or modify HB 588, known as the "top 10 percent" law. Enacted in 1997 in response to the ruling of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, in *Hopwood v. Texas*, banning race-sensitive admissions, the law has guaranteed that all Texas students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their public high-school classes will be admitted to any public university in the state. Because some policy makers have promoted such plans as an alternative approach to affirmative action, what occurs in Texas could influence admissions practices in a number of other states.

Supporters of the 10-percent plan have emphasized that it has helped create more-diverse freshman classes, both racially and geographically, at the University of Texas at Austin and at Texas A&M University at College Station -- the two selective public institutions that considered race in admissions before *Hopwood*. The plan's proponents say it also has strengthened colleges' ties with elementary and secondary schools and broadened access to the state's most competitive public universities. Top-10 students have been academically successful, performing as well as others who scored significantly higher on standardized college-entrance tests.

But opposition to the percent plan is mounting, especially from vocal parents of students in the highly competitive "feeder" high schools -- those several dozen public high schools, out of more than 1,000 in the state, with strong traditions of sending graduates to the state's public flagships. Such parents, along with parents of students who score just below the top 10 percent, or alumni whose families represent legacies at those institutions, complain that students automatically accepted through the plan are saturating the flagship campuses and limiting the flexibility to achieve diverse student bodies in the broadest sense.

Almost 70 percent of the students in Austin's 2003 freshman class were top-10-percenters -- and thus automatically admitted -- compared with only 42 percent of those who enrolled in 1996, when a race-sensitive admissions policy was in effect. As a result, the critics contend, seniors who attend demanding high schools and graduate just below the 10-percent threshold are being unfairly rejected -- "crowded out" by high-ranked students from less-competitive high schools. An increase in the number of applicants to Austin has aggravated this sense of an admissions squeeze. Anecdotal accounts, like one by Jim Yardley in *The New York Times* in April 2002, have suggested that many of the state's brightest students have been forced to pursue college outside Texas, creating a form of brain drain.

In the absence of empirical evidence, anecdote has dominated the court of public opinion and, to some extent, the policy discourse surrounding the 10-percent plan. A core question is whether students from highly competitive high schools have been truly

crowded out of the public flagships or the state. Until recently, however, no one has studied the college-enrollment patterns of Texas high-school graduates in enough depth to obtain an accurate answer.

As part of the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project -- a multiyear study, supported by the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to assess the consequences that new admissions policies have had on college enrollment in Texas -- we analyzed a baseline survey of 13,803 Texas high-school seniors whom we first interviewed in 2002 to learn about their college plans. A random subsample of 5,200 of those seniors were interviewed again one year later to determine who had actually enrolled in college, and where. Thus we can now link where students wanted to go to college with where they actually enrolled, according to class rank and type of high school.

Our comparisons distinguish among typical Texas high schools with average resources, the top 20 feeder high schools, other affluent schools, resource-poor schools, and resource-poor schools designated for Longhorn Opportunity or Century Scholars scholarship awards. (The Austin and College Station campuses focused on Longhorn and Century schools, respectively, as recipients of scholarships for top-10-percent graduates because of the schools' low college-going traditions.)

Our findings:

- Nearly 80 percent of college-bound seniors reported a first choice, and about half of them indicated a second choice. The cross-classification of those choices reveals a strong inclination to remain in the state. Only about 10 percent of students whose first preference was Austin or College Station specified the alternative flagship as their second preference, and another 10 percent named an out-of-state institution as a second preference. The vast majority named another Texas four-year institution as their second choice.
- Among the top 10 percent of students attending feeder high schools, just as many set their sights on the Texas public flagships as on institutions outside the state -- 37 percent each. By comparison, 43 percent of the seniors ranked in the second decile at such high schools designated one of the flagships as their top choice, while only 29 percent chose a college outside of Texas. Thus, the admissions squeeze experienced by feeder-school students has occurred in part because a greater share of those who rank in the second 10 percent than in the top 10 percent hope to attend the state's public flagships.
- High-school seniors who identified a college outside of Texas as their first preference were slightly more likely to identify another out-of-state institution as their second choice. Less than 10 percent of those students mentioned the University of Texas or Texas A&M as their backup.

Where did students actually enroll?

- In the state as a whole, 88 percent of the top-10-percent graduates who wanted to enroll at Austin or College Station, and 85 percent of those who preferred another four-year institution in Texas, enrolled in their first-choice college. Because top-10-percent students were guaranteed admission to their preferred institutions, presumably those who chose otherwise did so by preference or because of financial or personal circumstances.
- Although seniors in the second decile of their high-school classes lacked the admissions guarantee, nearly three-quarters of those whose top college choice was a flagship institution went on to enroll at one. Based on our statistically representative survey, it is difficult to argue that the percent plan undermined their access to the public flagships. Meanwhile, 71 percent of second-decile seniors whose top choice was another four-year institution in Texas also realized their goal.
- Specifically at feeder high schools, 75 percent of the seniors who aspired to attend either flagship, and 88 percent of those who wished to attend another four-year institution in Texas, enrolled at their top preference. Contrary to images popularized in the news media, we found that they were *more* successful in matriculating at their desired Texas college than was the average Texas high-school senior who ranked in the second decile.
- In contrast, 60 percent of students at the top of their classes who preferred institutions *outside* Texas enrolled out of state, while only 11 percent matriculated at a Texas flagship and 17 percent at another state four-year institution. Only 57 percent of those who graduated in the second decile of their high-school class and aspired to attend an institution outside of Texas managed to do so.

Our survey reveals little evidence that masses of students, including those who graduated from feeder schools, are being crowded out of the most selective public institutions in Texas. Instead, the greatest difficulty encountered by high-performing Texas students appears to be gaining admission to institutions outside the state. That problem is particularly pronounced for graduates of the feeder schools: Fewer than half who sought admission to out-of-state institutions actually enrolled at one. That feeder-school students who designated a college outside of Texas as their top choice were highly unlikely to enroll at Austin or College Station suggests that the public flagships no longer serve as backup institutions for them.

To further verify these conclusions, we conducted analyses that looked at different variables in the data to determine seniors' top institutional preferences and their actual enrollment decisions. Those analyses allowed us to simultaneously compare seniors having different demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. In addition to class rank and type of high school attended, we considered students' racial and ethnic backgrounds, their parents' educational status, and their knowledge of the top-10-percent law.

Not surprisingly, our research revealed that top-10-percent graduates were three times as likely as students in or below the third decile of their senior class to express a preference

for a public flagship over other four-year Texas institutions and more than 12 times as likely to enroll at one of the flagships.

We also discovered that students who graduated in the second-highest 10 percent of their classes were almost twice as likely as their classmates ranked at or below the third decile to express a preference for one of the two public flagships over other four-year institutions in Texas. And, contrary to anecdotes suggesting that highly capable students are being squeezed out of Texas' selective colleges, those students were also 4.5 times as likely to attend those two institutions as lower-ranked classmates.

What about students who graduated from feeder high schools? Compared with students attending typical Texas high schools, the feeder graduates were more than twice as likely to prefer Austin or College Station than another Texas four-year institution, but even more likely -- 3.4 times as much -- to want to attend a college outside the state. And their odds of matriculating out of state or at one of the Texas public flagships were similarly higher.

Finally, both public flagships experienced declines in minority-student enrollment after the *Hopwood* decision and have had some difficulty in attracting minority students ever since. College Station has had a particularly hard time: According to its own data, black students made up less than 3 percent, and Hispanic students accounted for less than 10 percent, of the in-state freshmen who entered in 2002, compared with 3.4 percent and 11.5 percent, respectively, in 1996. Our survey, unfortunately, reaffirms that trend. It reveals that black students are 34 percent more likely than white students to prefer non-Texas institutions over four-year Texas institutions, and that they prefer other four-year Texas institutions over the Austin and College Station campuses.

In sum, our research findings help set the record straight: Despite the recent calls to rescind HB 588 on the basis of anecdotal accounts suggesting that the best and brightest are being squeezed out of Texas public institutions, empirical evidence from a representative survey of Texas high-school seniors indicates otherwise. In fact, our examination of ranked preferences reveals that, if anything, students who leave the state do so by choice, not because they were denied admission to a preferred Texas institution. Based on students' preferences, it appears that more students, particularly those in the top 20 percent, would leave if they were admitted to their preferred out-of-state institution. The percent plan could very well be keeping them in the state.

Further, in response to allegations that the plan allows underqualified high-performing students from low-performing schools to gain college admittance, we would like to note that top-ranked students from resource-poor schools eligible for the Longhorn Opportunity and Century Scholars programs enroll out of state at some of the most competitive private institutions in the nation -- for instance, New York University, Smith College, the University of Chicago, and leading public institutions. Were claims about the low qualifications of top-10-percent students from poor Texas districts valid, those students would not be getting into highly selective institutions that consider a broad range of scholastic, extracurricular, and social factors in deciding whom to admit.

Ultimately, the question before lawmakers is whether the benefits of a percent plan outweigh its disadvantages -- particularly in a state like Texas, where historically low tuition has made public institutions accessible to students from a broad range of economic backgrounds. Whether by design or default, the plan has heightened awareness of the criteria used to allocate slots at institutions of varying selectivity. How should equity considerations be weighted in the future -- especially now that a narrowly tailored consideration of race and ethnicity has been ruled constitutional?

Along with other analyses using the admissions records of Austin and College Station, the findings that we have outlined lead us to identify both advantages and disadvantages in the top-10-percent plan. The plan's main advantage, which deserves preservation in some form, is its powerful message that the public flagships are for students from *all* Texas high schools, not only those that have historically dominated the flagships' admissions pools. However, while the evidence doesn't bear out some of the alleged adverse consequences of the plan, the growing saturation of entering classes with top-10-percent students does limit institutional flexibility. Moreover, as a strategy to diversify the ethnic and racial composition of entering classes, the plan capitalizes on residential segregation. Thus it is *not* race-neutral, as anti-affirmative-action proponents allege.

Based on our research, we recommend a modified percent plan, one that guarantees a minimal number of slots for graduates of all high schools; that encourages public higher-education systems to coordinate their admissions decisions as is done in California and Florida; and that permits a narrowly tailored consideration of race among many factors used in admissions decisions. Under such a modified plan, top-ranked students would no longer be guaranteed access to their preferred institution, but to a slot at a public university.

Whether the top decile is an appropriate threshold for an admissions guarantee is another question. Policy makers should consider that question in light of the changing demographics of the state, including the rapidly growing number of Hispanic students, the expansion of public higher education, and the equity and access goals that they wish to achieve.

Finally, state tax dollars would be well spent to strengthen achievement at Texas' underperforming high schools and develop incentive programs for districts that increase their college-going rates. Such efforts, combined with a modified percent plan and narrowly tailored consideration of race, would probably yield optimal results.

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Volume 50, Issue 20, Page B10