

Top 10 percent change must not punish minority students

By Mercedes Olivera

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You can tell we're in an era of shifting demographics in Texas when the state's lawmakers start arguing over numbers and percentages.

The latest debate is over the top 10 percent rule for college admission, crafted more than a decade ago as a colorblind remedy after affirmative action policies were banned in 1996.

Since 1998, state universities have been automatically admitting high school students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their class.

The result has been an increase in the number of Hispanic and black undergraduate students, from 15.3 percent in 1997 to more than 25 percent in 2007.

But now the University of Texas at Austin wants it changed, and state Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, has authored a bill that would limit the amount of 10-percenters to 50 percent of incoming freshman classes. A similar bill in the state House would limit it further, to 40 percent of incoming freshmen.

UT officials and Shapiro say that the policy has created a capacity problem and that some promising artists and scientists are going elsewhere because they can't get into UT. More than 80 percent of the incoming freshmen at UT in 2008 were 10-percenters.

But many Latino educators say the blame for the lack of space at the state's top institutions shouldn't lie on the shoulders of Hispanic, black and rural students who have benefited.

"It is UT's responsibility to put together an outreach and recruitment plan with sufficient rigor and resources to attract top 10 percent students," said Gustavo F. Cedillo, president of the Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education and faculty director at UT-Arlington. "It should be a plan equal to or better than that used to recruit the UT Longhorn football team."

So far, the university has come up only with a "trust us" kind of proposal, Cedillo said, and he's wary of a return to the state's history of discriminatory practices.

Princeton sociologist and researcher Marta Tienda agreed that UT is running out of space, but she said that is due to the lack of flagship institutions in Texas.

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In her latest study, released last month, she found that the number of high school graduates increased 50 percent between 1994 and 2004. But the number of slots at the state's public universities increased by only 27 percent. And much of the enrollment growth has gone to two-year institutions.

"Texas has one of the most intense college squeezes in the nation," she said, and "it shows the state's underinvestment in higher education."

Lost in much of the discussion is the fact that the number of students from poorer schools who are applying to UT has not changed substantially. Many Latino and black high-achieving students from low-income families still struggle just to pay the college application fee of \$40.

Meanwhile, tuition costs have soared and incomes have stagnated – numbers that also merit attention from lawmakers.