

Study: Top students not hurt by admissions law

10% rule has been criticized, but achievers who don't make cut still find places at UT, A&M

03:15 AM CST on Tuesday, January 20, 2004

By **KENT FISCHER** / The Dallas Morning News

Researchers at Princeton University say they have confirmed what officials at Texas' two flagship universities have been saying for years about the "top 10 percent" admissions law: It doesn't hurt smart kids who don't graduate at the top of their classes. Nor is the law pushing huge numbers of those kids to out-of-state schools.

The researchers interviewed a random sample of 5,200 college freshmen and asked them about their enrollment decisions. The researchers found that nearly three out of four high-achieving students who did not graduate in the top 10 percent were still able to attend either Texas A&M University or the University of Texas at Austin if they wanted.

The study also debunks the "brain drain" theory – that smart Texans are being forced to attend out-of-state colleges because the top 10 percent plan restricts their in-state enrollment options.

The study "demonstrates that top-performing students still have access to the prestigious Texas schools at similar rates," said the study's lead researcher, Marta Tienda, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton.

The law guarantees admission to any public university to all students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class. The plan has drawn criticism from some who fear that the admissions granted to students from low-performing high schools have come at the expense of bright kids from highly competitive schools.

State Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, said that in 2001 and 2002, a combined 2,220 students earned an automatic admission to college despite not having taken the state's recommended college prep curriculum.

The Princeton researchers "should sit at my desk and take the phone calls from parents whose kids did not get in," Mr. Wentworth said. "This 'entitlement' is not fair, and it should be repealed."

'Brain drain'

Dr. Bruce Walker, head of admissions at UT, said the Princeton study supports similar research the university has compiled since the top 10 percent plan was put into place in 1997.

Dr. Walker acknowledged that the plan has squeezed some high-achieving students out of the admissions process. But on the whole, it has not closed doors to deserving students, he said.

"Are there some good students going out of state because they didn't get into UT? Yes," Dr. Walker said. "But I think the fear that it's causing a 'brain drain' are unfounded."

The study found that Texas students who wanted to go to college elsewhere often have a tough time getting in. While nearly three-quarters of high-achieving students attended their Texas school of choice, less than 60 percent of those aspiring to an out-of-state school got in.

Diversity issue

Officials at Texas A&M said they, too, saw their experience confirmed by the study, with one exception. The study also found that the automatic admissions policy has helped increase diversity on the two flagship campuses. But Dr. Frank Ashley, head of admissions at A&M, said the law hasn't resulted in more diversity in College Station.

"For us, it just hasn't had a dramatic impact" on diversity, he said.

The Princeton researchers found that while diversity was up slightly, the top 10 percent plan as it currently stands isn't the answer.

"This does not mean the Texas top 10 percent plan has solved the need for increased diversity in higher education," Dr. Tienda said in a statement. "A modified top 10 percent plan combined with a narrow consideration of race would produce the best solution for Texas higher education."

That, in fact, has happened.

Last summer, UT officials announced plans to begin using race as a factor in admissions for those students not offered a spot in the freshman class under the top 10 percent plan.

E-mail kfisher@dallasnews.com