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Focus on higher education upgrades in Texas; Get past debate over top 10% law, make plan better

By MARTA TIENDA

WHILE the Texas top 10 percent law has succeeded in expanding higher education opportunities for students from many more Texas high schools than in the past, the demand for automatic admission to the state's public flagships, especially at the University of Texas at Austin campus, is reaching the limits of available spaces. The 10 percent plan, which expanded enrollment to students from high schools in low- and moderate-income communities, now faces challenges from those in wealthier communities. As the debate over college admissions in Texas shifts from race to class, can the 10 percent plan be saved? And, if so, how?

There is little question that the Texas top 10 percent law, a legislative response to the 1996 5th Circuit Court of Appeals' Hopwood decision, has shown positive results.

The plan has helped create more diverse freshman classes — racially, economically and geographically — at UT and Texas A&M University, the two public flagships. Top 10 percent students have been academically successful, performing as well as or better than others who scored significantly higher on standardized college entrance exams.

Yet, some have argued that the 10 percent law is a failure because high-performing students, who attend affluent feeder schools with strong traditions of sending their graduates to the state's flagship schools, are now denied admission and that significant numbers are leaving the state. At the same time, there are affirmative action foes who argue that the 10 percent plan is race neutral when in fact it reflects patterns of residential segregation.

Because no admission policy will satisfy everyone, the Texas challenge involves resolving two issues — resolving the admissions squeeze at the public flagships and devising a strategy to increase access on a fair basis in a state with huge educational inequalities.

In 1996, before the top 10 percent plan was enacted, both flagships admitted nearly the same percentage of freshmen (UT, 43 percent and A&M, 44 percent). But by 2004, 72 percent of UT's freshman class were automatic admits, while A&M automatic admits had leveled off at 50 percent. Although UT is being flooded with top 10 percent students — because it is the preferred college of growing numbers of high school graduates — still hundreds of Texas high schools do not send a single student to either flagship.

Claims of media pundits notwithstanding, analyses of a comprehensive survey of high school seniors ("Flagships, Feeders, and the Texas Top 10 percent Plan") reveal that feeder high school students who rank in the second 10 percent of their class still have higher access to UT and A&M than similarly ranked students who attend average Texas high schools. Before the top 10 percent law was enacted, graduates from feeder high schools enjoyed well more than their fair share of access to the flagships: Just 28 feeder high schools accounted for one-fourth to one-third of the 2000 freshmen at A&M and UT, respectively. Claims that the top 10 percent plan is forcing many talented students to leave the state also are wrong; the survey shows that students who leave the state do so because their top college choice is not in Texas.

Rather than conclude that the top 10 percent plan isn't working, Texas needs to move beyond the seemingly endless debate over whether to keep or dismantle the top 10 percent law and instead focus on how to make this plan better.

Gov. Rick Perry and the Legislature should consider implementing a percentage plan that:

- Caps the number of admission guarantees at no more than 50 percent per institution.
- Rations the automatic admission slots to high schools with low college-going traditions.
- Pegs the number of automatic admission slots to the carrying capacity of the public higher education systems.
- Requires public higher-education systems to coordinate their automatic admissions decisions, as is done in California and Florida.

Policy-makers also need to re-examine whether the top 10 percent of all high school graduating classes is an appropriate threshold for high merit, especially since Texas' college-age population is growing faster than the expansion of public higher education.

Finally, it is vital that Texas' underperforming schools not be abandoned. Strong outreach programs are required to raise college-going rates at resource-poor schools. Without scholarships, low-income students who excel academically are unlikely to attend a four-year college; therefore state tax dollars for scholarships should target resource-poor schools that have low rates of college attendance.

Building a strong, well-funded public education system requires a coordinated effort from elementary school through college. For Texas to compete economically in a globalized 21st century, policy-makers must combine the desire for equal opportunity with expanded educational access.

While the top 10 percent plan is an important step in the right direction, it is time to make some adjustments that will result in a better funded, more equitable and inclusive higher education system.

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