

10% rule not hindering good students

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Humberto Aguilera still remembers the nervous twitch he felt as a Churchill High School senior as he anxiously awaited word from the admissions office at the University of Texas at Austin.

Although he had a 92 grade point average and scored an impressive 1,280 on his SAT, Aguilera didn't make it into the top 10 percent of his graduating class. That would have made admission to UT automatic.

"I was raised a Longhorn, and I really wanted to get in because both my parents went there," Aguilera recalled.

As it turned out, UT accepted Aguilera.

In fact, in 2001, of the high-achieving applicants who didn't graduate in the top 10 percent of their class, the university accepted approximately 75 percent of them. That number was reported in a study released Monday by a Princeton University researcher.

The study dispels anecdotal reports that students who do well academically — but not well enough to finish in the top 10 percent — are being squeezed out of opportunities at the state's most selective public institutions.

It also rejects the notion that the top 10 percent plan is causing a "brain drain" of the state's brightest students, finding that, overwhelmingly, those who desire to attend Texas colleges and universities end up enrolling at them.

"First, the data demonstrate that there is no exodus from Texas of top-performing students," the study said. "And second, that high-ranking (top 20 percent) students and those from feeder high schools still retain their enrollment advantage."

The study, "Flagships, Feeders, and the Texas Top 10% Plan," was prepared by Princeton sociologist Marta Tienda and Sunny Niu, a research associate.

For their study, the researchers interviewed 13,803 Texas high school seniors about their college plans, then re-interviewed a "sub-sample" of 5,200 students a year later to determine who actually enrolled in college and where.

"It is clear that students who leave the state do so by choice, not because they were denied admission to their preferred Texas institution," Tienda wrote. "This suggests that the Texas top 10 percent law may in fact be keeping Texas' highest ranked students in state."

Among the study's key findings was that nearly 75 percent of high school seniors who graduated

Top 10 percent findings

Experts studying the impact of the Texas top 10 percent law determined:

- 88 percent of top 10 percent grads who wanted to attend UT or Texas A&M enrolled at the schools.
- 85 percent of top 10 percent grads who preferred other Texas colleges enrolled at those institutions.
- 60 percent of top 10 percent grads who preferred non-Texas schools enrolled at out-of-state colleges.
- Nearly 75 percent of grads who finished between top 10 and top 20 percent — and who preferred UT or A&M — enrolled at one of those institutions.
- 71 percent of grads in that same group who wanted to go to other Texas schools enrolled at those institutions.
- 57 percent of grads in that same group who preferred out-of-state schools enrolled at non-Texas colleges.

Source: 'Flagships, Feeders, and the Texas Top 10% Plan.'

between the top 10 percent and top 20 percent of their class, and whose top college choice was UT or A&M, enrolled at those schools.

Similarly, the study found that 71 percent of those who chose other Texas institutions as their first choice attended those institutions. By contrast, only 57 percent who preferred schools outside of Texas actually enrolled in out-of-state institutions.

The study comes out as lawmakers and academics are reviewing the state's so-called top 10 percent law, which guarantees admission to the college of their choice for students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class.

Lawmakers adopted the rule in 1997 after the Hopwood decision effectively ended affirmative action practices in Texas colleges.

While it has had modest success in improving minority enrollment at the state's selective institutions, UT administrators want to modify the law because the percentage of students who enter the university each year under the rule has risen dramatically in recent years.

Last fall, about 70 percent of UT's incoming freshman class was admitted under the 10 percent law, leaving fewer spots for the university to award based on traditional admissions standards.

For the full report, go to www.texastop10.princeton.edu/.