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Don't mess with college 'Top 10 Percent' plan

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All Texas parents keep a watchful eye on their progeny's performance in high school, knowing that a ``top 10 percent'' class rank guarantees admission to the state college of their choice. Acclaimed by many for opening doors to higher education for disadvantaged students, the program is now the target of sharp criticism from the University of Texas at Austin.

The state's flagship university wants to bury the program. I come to praise it - and to encourage legislators to fine-tune the program before they yield to lobbyists' calls to gut, dismantle or abolish it.

UT's leaders claim that the Austin campus has become overenrolled if not overrun with ``top 10 percent'' students. But data from Fall 2006 show a different story. First-time freshmen indeed increased by 509 to 7,421, but the figure included new entrants as well as freshmen who entered in the summer and continued into the fall. Among incoming students from Texas high schools, about 71 percent were admitted under the 10 Percent Plan, compared with 69 percent in Fall 2005.

The quantity at UT-Austin appears manageable, but what about the quality? All available data indicate that students admitted under the statewide 10 Percent Plan do better than their peers in grade point average and in college retention. That's to be expected, since students who do well in high school have a proclivity to do well in college, especially when UT and other schools make concerted efforts to recruit them and shower them with financial aid.

Final proof of the 10 Percent Plan's success is found in data on ethnicity. At UT-Austin, first-time freshman enrollment included 54.3 percent white, 0.5 percent American Indian, 5.2 percent African-American, 17.9 percent Asian-American, 18.7 percent Hispanic and 3.4 percent foreign. Amid the turbulence that attended major court cases (Hopwood from the Fifth Circuit and Grutter from the U.S. Supreme Court), the UT campus remains commendably populated by people from all economic classes and all corners of the state.

Credit for these outcomes properly goes to the late state Rep. Irma Rangel, D-Kingsville, who chaired the House Higher Education Committee that crafted the 10 Percent Plan. For nearly 18 months, I was privileged to work in her shadow as we sought race-neutral ways to assist colleges that genuinely wished to recruit students from every precinct in the state.

After sifting through dozens of options, we opted for something we called the frog-pond effect. That is, we determined that students who were ``big frogs'' in high school were likely to do well in college - regardless of the size of the frog pond that spawned them. Indeed, rank in class is a proven marker of excellence, and many scholarships and other honors traditionally flow from this measure of excellence.

The plan that emerged from Rep. Rangel's committee improved upon the

California model that requires many markers beyond a simple rank-in-class threshold. In part, it was based on research that showed a handful of largely suburban high schools generated many of the students admitted to the state's flagship schools, and at UT-Austin in particular.

All were excellent high schools, to be sure, but we identified many other good schools that had never sent a graduate to a flagship college in Texas. The 10 Percent Plan effectively got these schools ``into the game'' of higher education- much like the Olympic Games permits every country to enter three athletes in any given event.

The three-athlete limit might chafe Kenya in distance running and chap the United States in swimming, but there is global agreement that the system is fair.

Texas legislators can lend a sympathetic ear to UT-Austin's complaints, but the problem is that the 10 Percent Plan works only as it is, when its provisions are automatic and clear-cut. The benchmark could be set at a higher point for this one campus - say, the top seven percent - but such an adjustment would only delay ``filling up'' the school at some point down the road.

UT-Austin says its far-reaching campus plans call for improving student-teacher ratios by hiring more faculty and reducing the number of students. But these goals could be achieved by limiting transfer students rather than constraining the size of admitted classes.

There may be other options that UT-Austin could pursue, but if the core problem is ``too many excellent students,'' only two plausible solutions exist: Other Texas public institutions need to step up and aggressively recruit these students, and the state needs to create more attractive flagships.

(The results of that second option are readily visible in California, where virtually all UC campuses except the fledgling Merced campus are awash in applications from highly accomplished students.)

Just as not every qualified student in California can go to UC-Berkeley, perhaps not every qualified student can plan on attending UT-Austin.

As legislators mull changes to the 10 Percent Plan to accommodate UT-Austin, they should recognize how some state campuses - most notably Texas A&M University - stubbornly resist using the affirmative-action tools allowed by the Supreme Court.

By declining to reinstate racial admissions criteria in the wake of the Grutter decision, A&M lost any standing to be ``let off the hook'' from the requirements of the 10 Percent Plan.

As my dear friend Rep. Rangel might say, any school that shirks its obligations to qualified students deserves to be scolded - or worse.

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