

Top 10% plan has improved diversity at top Texas colleges

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A program that gives students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high-school classes automatic admission to Texas public universities is increasing enrollment of minorities at the state's flagship universities, a new study has found.

The state's flagship universities, such as Texas A&M University and the University of Texas at Austin, are also maintaining enrollment of top students from highly competitive feeder high schools, the study by Princeton University researchers has determined.

For students such as Marcus Cenicerros, a freshman at UT Austin and a graduate of Hanks High School, the Top 10 Percent Plan helps students who might not otherwise have a chance to go to one of the state's prestigious public universities.

But the plan does not take into consideration certain talents that might make a student a good candidate for a flagship school, such as the kind of coursework a student has completed, he said.

"I know a lot of kids who were very high in their classes who didn't necessarily take challenging classes," said Cenicerros, a government major and liberal arts honors student. "It depends on the size of the high school (students) go to and the type of instruction."

One problem that state Sen. Jeff Wentworth sees in the Top 10 Percent Plan is a lack of consideration of which of three high-school curricula -- minimum, recommended for college, or advanced -- a student completes upon graduation.

Wentworth also said that the 10 percent plan might not be necessary because it was created to help increase minority enrollment at Texas universities before the Supreme Court ruled this year that race can be considered a factor in university admissions.

"There are a lot of problems with the Top 10 Percent rule, and it needs to be repealed," said Wentworth, R-San Antonio. The rule "has energized and infuriated both students and parents alike."

Read "Flagships, Feeders, and the Texas Top 10 Percent Plan" at

www.texastop10.princeton.edu/

[Times education section](#)

Wentworth indicated that the Legislature might consider changing or repealing the Top 10 Percent Plan during a special session, if there is one, in April.

The Princeton University study contradicts criticism that the Texas Top 10 Percent Plan hinders the enrollment chances at flagship universities of students ranking in the second 10 percent of their high-school classes and that the plan has caused an exodus or "brain drain" of top performing students to universities out of state.

"Our study demonstrates that top performing students still have access to the prestigious Texas schools at similar rates. The Top 10 Percent Plan is simply allowing these institutions to increase racial and geographic diversity," said Marta Tienda, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton and lead author of the study.

"This does not mean the Texas Top 10 Percent Plan has solved the need for increased diversity in higher education," she said.

After the implementation of the Top 10 Percent Plan in 1997, the total number of Hispanic students who were accepted to in-state public universities has increased from 14,948 in summer-fall of 1998 to 18,213 in summer-fall 2001.

Of those students, 2,313 graduated in the top 10 percent of their high-school classes in 1998, compared with 3,747 in 2001.

At UTEP, Maggy Smith, dean of the University College, which oversees admissions, registrations and financial aid, considers the Top 10 Percent Plan a positive effort that is encouraging good students to attend college.

"We have seen an increase of top 10 percent students at UTEP," she said. "I think that any program that encourages students to go to college is a good thing."

Data from the Texas Education Agency indicate that in spring 2002, 7,177 students graduated from high school in El Paso and Hudspeth counties. Of 2,370 first-time freshmen who began attending UTEP in fall 2002, 283 graduated in the top 10 percent of their high-school classes.

The study was based on interviews of a random sample of 13,803 high-school seniors about their college plans. A report on the study is in today's issue of the weekly Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>).

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