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## **Study: Top 10 law not curbing college choices**

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Texas universities' top 10 percent policy is not squeezing out significant numbers of high-achieving students from the state's most competitive high schools, contrary to a common perception, according to a new study.

The Princeton University study found that 73 percent of seniors who finish in the second 10 percent of their graduating class, thus lacking automatic admission to the public university of their choice, nevertheless went on to enroll at either Texas A&M or the University of Texas-Austin if that was their top choice. Seventy-one percent of such students whose top choice was another four-year state school also realized their goals.

"Statistically, those are very high percentages," said Marta Tienda, a Princeton professor of sociology and public affairs and the lead author of the study. "There may be some students being squeezed out, but the data shows that students ranking just below the top 10 percent are definitely more successful at enrolling in Texas' flagship universities than lower-ranked high school graduates."

The study also found no evidence to suggest that the top 10 percent policy is causing an exodus of top performing students out of Texas.

The study was undertaken because of controversy involving Texas' top 10 percent policy, which was enacted into law in 1997 to counter a 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling that banned racial preferences in state university admissions. The law, which grants all students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their class automatic admission to any Texas public college, is credited with helping Texas maintain diversity despite the ruling.

Texas was the first state to implement such a law, and California and Florida followed.

But it has proved unpopular with certain students, parents and admissions counselors at "feeder" high schools, those academically challenging schools with strong traditions of sending graduates to UT and A&M, the state's most selective public universities. At such schools, it is not uncommon for students to record grade-point averages of nearly or even above 4.0 and SAT scores in the 1200s and yet not finish in the class' top 10 percent.

Stories in such newspapers as the Houston Chronicle and the New York Times focused on similar anecdotes, contrasting them with tales of students at less-challenging schools earning automatic admission with lower SAT scores and GPAs.

Tienda, a South Texas native who earned her doctorate at UT-Austin, argues that the statistics didn't back up the anecdotes in her study. She noted that students in the second

10 percent of their classes were 4.5 times as likely to attend UT or A&M as lower-ranked classmates.

Specifically at feeder high schools, it found 75 percent of seniors in the second 10 percent of their classes aspiring to attend UT or A&M and 88 percent of those aspiring to attend another Texas four-year institution enrolled at their top preference. Tienda said there is no comparison for the 75 percent figure, but she noted that Ivy League schools typically accept around 10 percent of applicants.

One critic of the top 10 percent law was unconvinced by the study.

"Seventy-five percent of second decile students going on to UT or A&M is pretty good," said Edward Blum, a 1973 UT graduate who is a fellow with the Center for Equal Opportunity, a Washington-based group opposed to racial preferences. "But I'm not sure that really gets to the heart of what's wrong with the top 10 percent plan, which is that there are a lot of very competitive high schools whose students graduate in the 65th percentile but are academically better prepared to succeed than students with top 10 GPAs but low scores on the SAT."

Tienda disagreed, saying the "vitriol is coming from the second 10 percent." Her study does not break down where students ended up enrolling beyond the second top 10.

The study followed thousands of Texas students over a one-year period. In 2002, 13,803 high-school seniors were interviewed about their college plans, and a year later, a random subsample of 5,200 were interviewed to determine where they actually enrolled.

The study broke down schools into such categories as top 20 feeder high schools, other affluent schools, schools with average resources, resource-poor schools and schools so lacking in resources and so historically bad at sending graduates to college that they are designated for special UT and A&M scholarship programs.

Contrary to media reports that some of the state's brightest students have been forced to pursue college outside Texas, creating a kind of brain drain, the study found that the greatest difficulty encountered by high-performing Texas students appears to be gaining admission to institutions outside the state. Sixty percent of students at the top of their classes who preferred schools outside of Texas, and less than half of students from feeder schools who felt similarly, actually enrolled at one.

The 5th Circuit ruling that banned racial preferences was overturned by the Supreme Court in June, but there is no apparent legislative movement to eliminate the top 10 percent law. UT has since announced a proposal to resume considering race in admissions in fall 2005, while A&M has announced it will not.