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ADMISSION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

By Richard C. Atkinson

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This week the last of the University of California's campuses issued admissions letters for the 1998 freshman class, bringing to a close the first round of the admissions process. By the time it is completed later this spring, all eligible California high school graduates will find a place at one of our campuses. But though it is too soon to judge in detail, preliminary figures show that this year's class, the first to enter UC since race and ethnicity were eliminated as factors in admission, may well include fewer underrepresented minorities -- African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans -- compared with entering classes of recent years.

We hope this is a temporary imbalance that will soon right itself. But if it does not, the irony for California will be that UC enrollment is falling among precisely those groups that are projected to constitute the majority of this state's high school graduates in the next century. The implications are easy to envision and difficult to accept for a public university dedicated to serving all the people of California.

At the heart of this problem is a simple, irreducible fact: California's six million school children face vastly unequal opportunities to obtain an education that will prepare them for college. We have schools that measure up to the best in the nation and schools in which, sadly, basic literacy is the ceiling rather than the floor of academic accomplishment. African-American and Hispanic students are disproportionately concentrated in lower-achieving schools, which tend to be located in low-income urban or rural areas and to enroll students from poor families with limited English. The obstacles confronting such schools are sometimes so overwhelming that they are beyond the ability of even the best teachers, principals, and school boards to overcome.

The challenge for UC is to expand opportunity for promising students without regard to race and ethnicity, consistent with Proposition 209 and with the Regents' mandate to maintain the University as the one of the world's most richly diverse centers of learning. We could, for example, broaden the pool of those eligible for UC to include the top 4 percent of every high school in California, to give a leg up to those students who have excelled despite an impoverished learning environment. Or we could lessen the current emphasis on high school honors and advanced placement courses,

which disadvantages students from schools that do not offer them. Or we could find ways to help less-affluent students afford SAT preparation classes to improve their scores and thus their chances of admission.

All of these are among the proposals currently being considered by the University's faculty. Each has its pros and cons, its supporters and opponents, but the common thread among them is to broaden access by ensuring that our admissions criteria do not unfairly screen out students who have the talent and motivation to succeed in college but not the schooling to qualify them for admission.

Yet we know that what we can do through the admissions process, though helpful, is ultimately limited. The hard fact is that inequities in educational opportunities in the K-12 schools translate into very real differences in students' preparation and readiness for college. Admissions procedures and criteria can try to take these inequities into account, but they cannot correct them.

The only real answers are the long-term answers: revitalized schools, involved parents, and communities that refuse to settle for anything less than an outstanding education for their children. We have already begun to apply the tremendous creative energy available within the University to the search for at least some of these answers. Each of our campuses is working every day with disadvantaged schools in its region to motivate students, share what we know with teachers, and lessen, if we cannot entirely eliminate, the educational inequities California's children face. Some of our most exciting initiatives involve the Internet and computer technologies, which are enabling UC to collaborate with the schools on a scale unimaginable even a few years ago.

Anyone fortunate enough to see these efforts firsthand, as I have, knows that if any state can succeed in a challenge of this magnitude, it is California. But while there is much that UC and the schools can do together, we cannot do it all. And we cannot do it alone. The needs of the school system are so great, the challenge so enormous, that we must have the help of every major institution in our society, beginning with the family and extending to civic groups and churches, the business and professional communities, all the way up to the State and federal governments.

The rules of the game are changing in California. The only way to win is to make our schools as good as our children and our future need them to be, whatever it takes.