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STATEMENT ON IMPROVING THE ACADEMIC PREPARATION  
OF BLACK STUDENTS FOR UNIVERSITY-LEVEL STUDY

Regents' Meeting

David P. Gardner, President  
University of California

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San Francisco

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Several months ago, I reported to you some statistics released by the California Postsecondary Education Commission in April, 1985 regarding the low rates at which students from underrepresented minority groups in California qualify for University admission. The rate at which Black students attain eligibility was, as you will recall, especially disturbing. According to the CPEC study, only 3.6 percent of Black high school graduates were eligible for admission to the University of California in 1983, compared with 13.2 percent of all public high school graduates in our state; this rate was the lowest of any underrepresented minority group included in the CPEC study. Moreover, the Black eligibility rate has not improved since the previous survey was done in 1975. In fact, the data suggest that during the eight years between surveys, the eligibility rate for Black students may actually have declined.

Enrollment of Black students at the University of California, however, has increased in recent years, although less rapidly than has the enrollment of other underrepresented minority groups. But it should be noted that the proportion of Black students admitted by Special Action remains high--45 percent of

Black freshmen in Fall 1983, compared with 28 percent of Chicanos, 19 percent of Latinos, and about six percent for all students. Clearly it will not be possible to increase Black enrollment significantly over time without basic improvements in their academic preparation and, therefore, in their eligibility rate.

It should be stressed, of course, that this is a national, not a local, phenomenon. Indeed, there is mounting evidence that UC's increasing enrollment of Black students is running counter to the national trend, which is one of declining enrollment of Black students in our nation's colleges and universities. A recent New York Times article reported, for example, that the proportion of Black high school graduates going on to college declined from 34 percent in 1976 to 27 percent in 1982. Moreover, recent national findings on the educational performance of Black elementary and secondary students are far from encouraging.

For example, a 1985 report by the College Board called "Equality and Excellence: The Educational Status of Black Americans" pointed out that at the high school level Blacks are proportionately less likely than Whites to be enrolled in college-preparatory programs. And even among those who are enrolled in academic programs, Black students on the average take fewer years of course work in mathematics, physical sciences, and social studies than their White counterparts. This last point is borne out by the CPEC eligibility study I mentioned a moment ago, which

showed that the most common reason Blacks were ineligible for University admission was that they do not take the courses required for admission to UC in as large a percentage as do high school students generally.

The College Board study concludes with this statement: "These are not issues currently at the forefront of the nation's attention. Educators and policymakers who are concerned about equality, as well as fundamental excellence, must put them there." I concur, and wish further to observe that the basis of this problem requires explication and action on our part, and not resignation or indifference on grounds that this problem is somehow inherently resistant to corrective measures or arises from innate considerations rooted in ethnicity. The problem of inadequate academic preparation among Black students is of enormous importance not only to Black youth and their families, but to our society generally, and we should pay it the attention it rightly deserves.

The University of California, as the primary State agency for research, is especially well-qualified to take the lead in discovering and analyzing the causes of this problem; and I believe we have an educational responsibility to do so. If we can increase our understanding of the factors contributing to the inadequate academic preparation of Black students, we will be in an excellent position to develop more comprehensive and effective ways to address this problem not only within UC, but in ways

helpful to other institutions and agencies in our society working to improve educational opportunity for everyone in our state and nation.

In order to achieve major, long-term results, the best starting point would be to undertake a systematic research effort on the factors that influence and determine the academic preparation and eligibility rates of Black high school graduates. I have in mind an effort modelled on the Linguistic Minority Project, begun by UC last year. That project brings faculty research talents within the University to bear on the learning problems of students from bilingual or immigrant families, and focuses primarily on Hispanic students. This approach, which holds out hope for improving the college-going rate of Hispanic students, might well serve as a model for pursuing UC's interest in improving the college-going rate of Black students.

I intend, therefore, to convene a task force composed of University scholars whose areas of research bear on this issue in its many aspects. They will be joined by University administrators who have experience in working with these issues on a policy level as well as on a day-to-day basis. I will ask the task force to:

- 1) Review the current research bearing on this issue, and summarize our current knowledge about it while identifying research gaps to be filled;

- 2) Determine the kinds of investigations that must be conducted to further our understanding of the reasons for low educational achievement among Blacks and to identify educational models that have been tried and proven successful;
- 3) Guide the resulting research program; and
- 4) Recommend how the research findings can be shared broadly to generate public discussion with other educational institutions, elected public officials, civic and business leaders, members of the Black community, and other interested parties. Such discussions should not only help us better understand this problem, but also assist us in developing specific plans to achieve the goal that Black students progress through the California educational system at approximately the same rate as do other Californians on average, and, similarly, that they achieve the same rate of eligibility for admission to the University.

I will keep you informed of our progress.