

First-Time Freshman Eligibility for California Public Higher Education

LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE

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Master Plan's Principles for College Access



The *Master Plan for Higher Education* specifies percentage targets that define the pool from which each higher education segment should accept its students. Specifically, the plan calls for:

- Community colleges to accept all applicants 18 years and older who can benefit from attendance.
- The California State University (CSU) to draw from the top one-third (33.3 percent) of public high school graduates and to accept all qualified community college transfer students.
- The University of California (UC) to draw from the top one-eighth (12.5 percent) of public high school graduates and to accept all qualified community college students.



In order to serve their target populations, UC and CSU have adopted their own specific admissions criteria—such as minimum grade point average (GPA) and SAT requirements. Students meeting these requirements are considered “eligible” for admission by the segments.



Purpose of CPEC Eligibility Study

- Existing law requires the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) to periodically estimate the percentage of California public high school graduates that are eligible for admission under the segments' admissions criteria.

- As part of the 2003-04 budget, the Legislature adopted supplemental report language directing CPEC and the segments to complete and submit an eligibility study based on 2003 public high school graduates. This eligibility study was released on May 19, 2004.

- Overall, the findings of CPEC's periodic eligibility studies help the Legislature:
 - Gauge how well the segments (based on their admissions criteria) are selecting the target populations called for in the Master Plan.
 - Better understand enrollment demand in making budget and policy decisions for higher education.
 - Identify patterns in terms of eligibility for higher education.
 - Re-examine existing eligibility criteria.



Where Are the Segments Relative To Their Master Plan Targets?



CSU Below Master Plan Target

- In its recent eligibility study, CPEC found that CSU is drawing from the top 28.8 percent of public high school graduates. This is about 4.5 percentage points below CSU's Master Plan target of about 33.3 percent.



UC Above Master Plan Target

- The CPEC found that UC is drawing students from the top 14.4 percent of high school graduates, which is above its Master Plan target of 12.5 percent. (As we discuss later, we believe UC may actually be drawing from a much larger pool.)



What Are the Implications for Future Enrollment Funding?

- For many years, a high priority for the Legislature has been to fund enrollment levels at UC and CSU that are consistent with goals expressed in the Master Plan. The findings of CPEC's periodic eligibility studies help the Legislature make informed decisions about funding enrollment growth.

- The CPEC's recent eligibility findings suggest that UC's enrollment could grow more slowly than CSU's if existing Master Plan targets are to be observed. This is because UC is above and CSU is below the Master Plan. Thus, there is no analytical basis to provide the segments with the same percentage of enrollment growth funding in the coming years (as committed by the Governor in his compact with UC and CSU).



Are Some Students “Potentially Eligible” for College?

- Unlike previous eligibility studies, CPEC’s recent study based on California’s 2003 high school graduates does not identify students as potentially eligible for admission. For example, CPEC’s 1996 eligibility study identified a large portion of students as potentially eligible (and not “fully eligible”) for UC simply because they did not take at least one of the SAT tests. This meant UC was drawing its students from a much larger pool than the Master Plan target.

- We believe information about potentially eligible students is critical for the Legislature. Not only would it assist with the understanding of the size of the pool from which UC and CSU actually draw their freshmen, but it would also assist in identifying reasons why otherwise academically qualified students are deemed not fully eligible by the segments.



How Should the State Define Its Top High School Graduates?



Additional Analyses Needed on Current Admissions Criteria

- In directing CPEC to conduct the eligibility study, the Legislature also required “in-depth analyses of course-taking patterns, grades, and test scores.” However, such information was largely excluded from the report.
- While not all students can qualify for admission to the segments given the Master Plan’s limits on eligibility, this information would assist the Legislature in ensuring that all students are provided the opportunity to prepare for admission. Thus, we recommend the Legislature direct CPEC to provide the data and analyses it previously requested.



Need to Re-Examine Existing Eligibility Standards

- Definitions of eligibility reflect important policy choices that affect access to the state’s higher education systems, yet they have been made by the segments themselves with minimal legislative oversight. The Legislature also has little information about how well existing criteria are aligned to its K-12 education priorities and expectations.
- Thus, we recommend the Legislature more clearly define the state’s top high school graduates. We believe the targets specified in the Master Plan should—to the extent possible—be defined on the basis of data available for *all* high school students and not just for those that take a voluntary test like the SAT.
- For example, the Legislature could specify that the top one-eighth and top one-third of high school graduates be based solely on high school GPA and scores on the California Standards Tests. Under this scenario, eligibility requirements would be objective, transparent, and based on measurements aligned to K-12 curriculum standards.