May 9, 2008

Michael T. Brown
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Chair, UC Systemwide Academic Senate
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Dear Michael:

RE: Systemwide Senate Review of the BOARS’ Revised “Proposal to Reform UC’s Freshman Eligibility Policy”

The relevant committees of the Riverside Division have given the revised BOARS proposal very careful consideration. The Committee on Educational Policy [CEP], the Committee on Preparatory Education [CPE] and the Undergraduate Council [UC] each have had lengthy discussions of the document and prepared detailed reports. Likewise on April 25, members of all three committees, together with their colleagues on the Executive Council [EC], met in a special two hour meeting with Mark Rashid, the Chair of BOARS who kindly agreed to answer their questions. Finally on 28 April and again on 5 May, the Executive Council devoted the better part of its meeting to this topic.

The EC members acknowledged, and saluted, the endless hours that their colleagues on BOARS spent on this revision, and they were unanimous in their fervent desire that UC Riverside enlarge its pool of applicants and become a “selective” campus. Yet in the end, a majority decided that the revised BOARS proposal was not the best means to do so, and they formally rejected it. Having said that, I must note that this issue generated sharp divisions within individual members as well as among the entire committee; indeed in my two years as Divisional Chair, I have seen nothing fix the attention of my colleagues and stir their emotions as the revised BOARS proposal has. In seeking to explain our turmoil and our ultimate decision, I must begin with the three committee reports.

The members of the Undergraduate Council voiced considerable enthusiasm for the revision. They maintain that since the status quo “does not serve those campuses who need to search intelligently for good students with scores close to the cut-off,” the revised BOARS proposal gave UC Riverside “the chance to better manage the quality of our undergraduate student body” while assisting “UCR’s move to a fully selective admissions process.” Although the UC members had been equally supportive of the original proposal, they noted with
satisfaction that BOARS had responded to earlier criticism about the perceived move away from a firm guarantee to the top 1/8th of the state’s graduating high school class by refashioning another guarantee. Yet even in their endorsement of the general idea, the UC members were concerned about the cost of underwriting the comprehensive review of all files, and they were anxious about the short-term problems that might attend the shift to the new system and might result in a significant, if transitory, enrollment decline. These risks, however, were more than justified, the committee argued, since the new system would “improve the academic profile of our freshmen admits.”

These risks -- and many others -- loomed large in, nay dominated, the deliberations of the Committee on Preparatory Education. Its members concluded that given the mounting difficulty of meeting the campus enrollment targets, “these changes will almost certainly lower the academic profile of UCR students,” which “is already low.” Since “in the last two years we have seen a discouraging decline in first-year retention rates, along with an increase in first-year academic difficulty,” CPE felt that the lamentable situation “will almost certainly get worse” with the implementation of the new admissions scheme. After all, Riverside already admits “the highest proportion of students at the lower end of the applicant pool as measured by academic qualifications,” and that proportion will likely grow larger still because of the constant pressure to the enrollment numbers and “because the policy reduces the minimum qualifications for entry into UC.”

The idea of increasing the percentage of ELC admissions from 4% to 12.5% further darkened CPE’s already somber mood. The recollection of analyses done seven years ago haunted the committee; since it was then found that increasing ELC admissions to only 8% produced “severe… negative effects on the academic profile of the entering class,” the members were distressed to find that the BOARS proposal used data at least five years ago and that it altogether failed “to compare adequate measures of the academic profile of entering classes at different levels of ELC.”

Equally distressing was the possible public impact of the BOARS proposal: “if newspapers simply report that UC is reducing its minimum requirements for admission from a 3.0 to a 2.8 GPA, reducing the number of required a-g courses, and eliminating the SAT subject tests, this could lead to a widespread sense among the public that the University has significantly lowered its standards.” Yet CPE noted with alarm that there was no evidence of any survey of parents and students about whether the new scheme “would make them more or less likely to enroll at UC.” Nor was there any evidence of consultation with “important constituencies in the state,” particularly with high school counselors.

Consequently, the CPE members felt that the BOARS proposal will produce only “increasing rates of academic difficulty and retention problems for first-year students, additional costs for UCR’s preparation programs and for other programs designed to improve ‘freshman success,’ and greater disruption in the lives of students who find they must leave UCR, along with costs to their families.” In short, their prediction of the likely impact on Riverside -- and on the entire system -- was dismal indeed.

Many of these concerns also figured prominently in the report from the Committee on Educational Policy, albeit in a somewhat muted form. Its members were “very concerned
about the administrative and financial burdens involved in giving comprehensive review a more extensive role in the revised BOARS proposal,” and while the BOARS proposal attempted to alleviate this concern, the Riverside admissions officials only revived it with their insistence that “there will be substantial additional costs incurred by the new regime.” Furthermore in light of the mounting pressure for the campus to meet its steadily increasing enrollment targets, the CEP members were “particularly concerned about the potential for downward pressure on the quality of the students that will be admitted to UCR.”

Granted the new scheme would finally make several thousand excellent and hitherto ineligible students “visible,” but CEP doubted “whether the campus would be well positioned to compete for the very qualified students” among the newly “visible.” Their doubts are based on “recent history” which “has suggested some campuses may opt to use a larger pool of admissible students to increase their enrollment.” Consequently UC Riverside might well confront an “erosion in the quality of our enrolled students,” a baleful development which in turn would force the campus “to shift additional financial and other resources to preparatory education.”

These concerns, together with serious doubts about BOARS’s insistence that “eliminating the SAT Subject test requirement would eliminate a considerable financial and academic burden on high school students and their families, led CEP to conclude that “we would need to have a better understanding of how the revised BOARS proposal would affect admissions at the less selective campuses before we could fully endorse the proposal.”

The members of the Executive Council pondered these reports and, at various moments in its discussions, mirrored the wildly varying conclusions. They applauded their colleagues on BOARS for their devotion to this vital topic, and they welcomed the determined effort to make the UC admissions criterion less of a blunt instrument. Nevertheless serious doubts stayed the EC’s collective hand from signaling its assent.

First and foremost, the fabled “bright line” of minimum UC eligibility, which may appear in Oakland as an intellectual abstraction, is such a vivid reality to many in Riverside that it is possible to shave from its reflected glow. Since many faculty often have to deal with minimally qualified students who just barely made the cut-off, they understandably tremble at the prospect of replacing the bright line with a broad grey zone, which would allow hard-pressed admissions staff to dip lower still into the applicant pool.

To be sure, these apprehensions may be unfounded. Towards that end, EC members as well as their colleagues on CEP and CPE would be immeasurably relieved if BOARS can explain clearly and precisely how the revised proposal will produce an entering UC class better prepared and/or more diverse. Absent such an explanation, we are left wondering if the game is worth the candle. In 1867, the British Conservative government pushed thru the Second Reform Bill, a fundamental change in the political status quo, enfranchising large sections of the working class. Reactionary critics derided this measure as the “leap in the dark,” while more rational Tories argued it was a necessary concession in the face of growing radicalization and possible revolution. The current BOARS proposal naturally brings the 1867 episode to mind, but in 2008, it seems as though we are being asked to leap in the dark without a clear compelling reason. Absent such an explanation, a majority could not approve the proposal.
It followed naturally enough that the EC members echoed CEP’s lamentation over the proposal’s “lack of transparency in presentation,” as they puzzled over the precise goal of this exhaustive exercise. At bottom, it seemed to be largely about the 4-6,000 graduating seniors with relatively high academic indicators [GPAs over 3.2 and SAT scores over 1000] and without either the SAT Subject test or a few of the requisite a-g courses and thus currently ineligible for review. [In subsequent discussions, the students in question came to be referred to as the “upper right red dots” from Figure 2 on page 28 of the BOARS proposal]. The members of the EC heartily agreed with BOARS that the University needs to consider ways of admitting these students. Yet at the same time, they repeatedly wondered if it was not possible to develop any alternate scheme to do so without revamping the entire admissions status quo and plunging the state and several campuses into even a temporary state of confusion. Towards that end, a colleague posited the following alternates:

(a) UC could examine the “A by E” policies of the campuses and attempt to reconstruct the A by E policy in a more efficient and equitable fashion;

(b) UC could change eligibility in the local context by one percentage point, from 4% to 5% -- and then evaluate;

(c) UC could create ETR for high GPA students – for example, students who have a 3.5 GPA or above -- who are technically ineligible, because they have failed to satisfy one a-g requirement or because they have failed to take the subject tests;

(d) UC could set a flat (but adjustable) admissions requirement. The start point could be at least a 3.2 GPA in 11 of 15 a-g courses (by junior year) and at least a 1000 score on the SAT Reasoning test;

(e) UC could replace A by E with ETR.

On mature reflection any of these schemes might well allow the existing admissions system sufficient flexibility to enrolling the phalanxes of “upper right red dots” without forcing all parties concerned into a period of chaos.

Many of those who voiced these concerns conceded that their fears might well be excessive. As one perspicacious colleague observed, the final decision came down to the fact that some were less optimistic than others. Another lamented the late arrival of UCOP’s new strict attitude to managed enrollment which withholds any financial rewards from campuses that overenrolled; if implanted earlier, it might well have forestalled Riverside’s recent enrollment shortfalls and so encouraged the “bulls” while calming the “bears” on campus.
As I report the EC’s final decision, I must also convey our hearty applause for our colleagues on BOARS and for their determination to get this vital matter right. For my part, I am fairly certain that either a revised proposal with a clearer rationale or a more limited one designed to capture “the upper right red dots” would find favor. To the weary BOARS members, dismayed at the prospect of another revision, I can only echo Henry V at the siege of Harfleur — “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more…”

Yours faithfully,

Thomas Cogswell
Professor of History; and
Chair of the Riverside Division