Comprehensive review will restore cultural diversity in classroom

CHALLENGES: Prop. 209, SP-1 deprived UCLA of more varied student body

By **Patricia Greenfield**

Today the UC Board of Regents will vote on a proposal for comprehensive review in undergraduate admissions. Comprehensive review provides an important tool for achieving the goal of diversity in the legal environment of Prop. 209.

In the proposal, comprehensive review is defined as a "process by which students applying to UC campuses are evaluated for admission using multiple measures of achievement and promise while considering the context in which each student has demonstrated academic accomplishment."

At UCLA, we have been doing comprehensive review for a number of years. If the regents pass their proposal today, this process will no doubt be extended to virtually all applicants.

Several working groups of the UCLA Academic Senate Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Relations with Schools have been working all summer to improve our system of comprehensive review, while maintaining its good features and making it feasible for the annual review of approximately 42,000 freshman applicants to UCLA.

The juxtaposition of two directives from the regents and from the people of California has created the central issue of UC admissions policy: how to maintain representation of diverse groups within the university while obeying the law and the regents. The first directive, a resolution of the Regents of the University of California on May 20, 1988, included the following:

"Mindful of its mission as a public institution, the University of California seeks to enroll, on each of its campuses, a student body that ... demonstrates high academic achievement or exceptional personal talent, and that encompasses the broad diversity of cultural, racial, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds characteristic of California."

A second directive, Proposition 209, was voted into law in November, 1996:

"The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education or public contracting."

Prop. 209 followed on the heels of a similar (1995) resolution from the regents, SP-1, which also banned racial or ethnic preferences in admissions. A dilemma followed: How can we maintain representation of diverse groups within the university (1988 regents' resolution) while obeying the law (Prop. 209) and the regents (SP-1)?

The initial effect of SP-1 and Prop. 209 was the precipitous decline of already underrepresented groups in the UC system; the most severely hit were Native Americans, followed by African Americans and, third, Latinos. Although the population of these groups has since almost recovered in the UC system as a whole, this has not been the case at the two most selective campuses, UCLA and Berkeley. At UCLA, groups that were already underrepresented on our campus before SP-1 and Prop. 209 – Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos – are even more underrepresented in 2001.

However, the improvement and more widespread use of comprehensive review has the potential to regain lost ground on the regental goal to achieve "broad diversity of cultural, racial, geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds characteristic of California."

Comprehensive review must be both fair and comprehensive. The CUARS system offers both: comprehensiveness by including 1) an academic review based on multiple criteria such as grades, course difficulty, AP exams, SAT I and II, participation in intellectual activities such as science fairs; 2) a personal achievement review including such things as student government, sports, community service and artistic achievement; and 3) a review of life challenges.

What are life challenges? Life challenges are barriers that make it more difficult for an applicant to present the qualifications necessary for admission to UCLA. Life challenges are theoretically independent of ethnic group membership. In practice, however, they are not. Different groups, because of their history and current situation, encounter different challenges with different frequencies. For example, the children of Latino immigrants often encounter the educational challenge of having parents who may not have had the opportunity even to complete elementary school, let alone high school.

This challenge would be almost nonexistent among African Americans or Euro-Americans, for example. Additionally, all underrepresented groups experience the challenge of poor schools. Similar to the concept behind President Richard Atkinson's ELC (Eligibility in the Local Context), low school quality is one of the factors that the UCLA Admissions Office currently credits as an important life challenge.

Virtually any given life challenge can be experienced by any group and constitutes a barrier independent of race or ethnic group mem-

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bership.

Indeed, many challenges that are part of the life challenge evaluation – for example, physical disabilities of self or a family member – are shared more or less equally by all groups, both over and underrepresented in the UCLA population.

To take into account life challenges in undergraduate admissions is consistent with Prop. 209 because the challenges are given equal weight in the admissions process no matter who experiences them: white, black, Latino, Native American or Asian. They do not involve preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin.

The way life challenges have been incorporated into the UCLA admissions process in the past is the following: For any given level of academic competence, that level is deserving of more recognition if it has occurred in the presence of significant life challenges.

The assessment of life challenges has never been a substitute for academic competence; instead, it has been a complementary dimension in the admissions process.

It has also been a complement to the assessment of personal achievement. A given level of personal achievement is also more credible in the admissions process if it has been achieved in the presence of significant life challenges.

After the admissions cycle of 1999 was complete and the freshman class admitted, I carried out a statistical analysis of the relationship between life challenge and underrepresented status.

Would it be possible to demonstrate a connection

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between the number and severity of life challenges and membership in an underrepresented group?

In 1999, life challenge evaluation of applicant dossiers involved assigning points for different types of challenge; points were added up for a life challenge score.

What I found was that life challenges are not equally distributed among different ethnic groups. As the level of life challenge rises from zero points, the proportion of admitted students from statistically under-represented groups (African American, Latino and Native American) also rises, and the proportion of admitted students from statistically overrepresented groups (Asian American and Euro-American) declines.

The relationship between life challenge and underrepresented status is a linear one: The higher the score of life challenge, the more likely an admitted student is to come from an underrepresented group.

What do these findings mean? It means that life challenge assessment successfully identifies the barriers that keep the number of underrepresented group members down in UCLA's population. It also means that, to the extent that life challenges are taken into account in admissions, we can level the playing field for all applicants, not just for underrepresented minority groups.

The statistical analysis also demonstrated that consideration of life challenges makes the university more accessible to underrepresented groups.

In other words, the statistical analysis showed that, small as the number of underrepresented minorities were in the 1999 admits, the number would have been smaller still if life challenges had not been taken into consideration.

However, life challenge assessment can, for the freshman class of 2002, be made much more effective in redressing underrepresentation within the constraints of Prop. 209.

The effectiveness of life challenges between 1996 and 2001 was limited in part by SP-1, which not only banned preferential treatment by race or ethnicity, but also provided that "not less than 50 percent and not more than 75 percent of any entering class on any campus shall be admitted solely on the basis of academic achievement." Therefore, the life challenge factor could be considered for only half the class, at most.

Today's proposal for comprehensive review would eliminate the "academic achievement only" category altogether. If it passes, one obstacle to achieving the goal of diversity in the legal environment of Proposition 209 will be removed: Life challenges can be taken into account in admitting the whole class, not merely a fraction.

A second limitation of life challenge assessment has been the omission of many important barriers that individual applicants face. One of these is neighborhood quality, which, among other effects, shapes the applicant's all-important peer group.

To respond to the need for a neighborhood quality measure, the chair of CUARS, geography professor Nicholas Entrikin, has used geographical information systems to assess neighborhood quality from zip code and census information on characteristics such as poverty level and the proportion of parolees living within a zip code area.

To live in an area in the lowest quartile on this measure will be considered a life challenge. This is an example of CUARS' recent work to improve the fairness of the life challenge system by figuring out ways of measuring additional barriers that can be assessed in every application.

How can we make comprehensive review not only comprehensive but also fair? One way is to make sure that the evaluators of applicant dossiers have a clear set of criteria for making their judgements.

Because of the limitations of the human brain, social scientists have found that multiple judgments based on specific criteria are generally more reliable (i.e., yield more agreement between raters) than a single global judgement based on general criteria.

Another important condition for reliability is to hold many factors constant to reduce the number of variables being evaluated. The system that CUARS has developed and is proposing for the campus has both these characteristics.

Agreement between raters equates to fairness: Interrater reliability means that all applicants will be evaluated by the same criteria to the maximum extent humanly possible.

Another aspect of fairness relates to how the proposed life challenge scale will enter into admissions decisions. For example, how do we ensure fairness to those applicants who have not been challenged in these ways?

One criterion of this type of fairness would be to limit the proportion of "challenged" admittees from each academic rank group (based on a nonformulaic weighting of multiple criteria) to no more than the proportion of "unchallenged" admittees from the next higher academic rank.

In addition, the lower the academic qualifications, the greater the degree of challenge required to compensate for it. Such criteria and weightings ensure that life challenge is a complement to academic and personal achievement, not a substitute for them.

Another potential benefit of comprehensive review and the removal of the "academic only" admissions category is that we can admit students with high potential for accomplishment in many fields, such as government, arts and community service – not just future academics.

For many years, Harvard has declined to accept a class made up entirely of National Merit Scholars or 1600 SAT scorers in favor of a balanced class of future musicians, politicians, writers, artists, etc.

In this way, Harvard has produced students who are interesting to each other and leaders in every field imaginable. UCLA has the applicant pool to do likewise. The removal of an "academic only" layer based primarily on grades and test scores opens up this same possibility for UCLA.

Furthermore, there is evidence that the greater consideration of personal achievement will also result in more balanced group representation without using race or ethnicity in the admissions process.

In UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television, comprehensive review is routine and required. In order to select from UC-eligible applicants, the school gives each applicant an opportunity to have an audition, interview or portfolio evaluation, as well as an evaluation of a professionally oriented essay and questionnaire.

The result of this process is ethnic diversity. Approximately 39 percent of incoming students (both before and after Prop. 209 and SP-1) are from groups that are grossly underrepresented in the rest of the campus. These students have very low attrition and very high success rates.

But in order for comprehensive

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review to diversify talent as well as ethnicity in the College of Letters of Science, we must make changes in our criteria of success at UCLA.

For the immediate future, we can put more weight on attrition and less on freshman GPA as tests of our admissions success. At the same time, we need to work to develop new measures of student success at UCLA.

As a teacher, I feel that SP-1 and Prop. 209 have deprived us of something very precious in both undergraduate and graduate education: diversity of cultural and ethnic viewpoints in the classroom and the laboratory.

This loss is especially noticeable in my psychology and honors courses on culture and human development. These courses were built around the opportunity for students and teachers to learn from each other's family backgrounds and life experiences.

Since SP-1 and Prop. 209, some cultural backgrounds and ethnic experiences are systematically missing from the seminar table and lecture hall. Comprehensive review, if implemented as suggested here, can bring them back.

Greenfield has researched and written about child and adolescent development, family life and school experiences of all the major ethnic groups in California, as well as related issues in Chiapas, Mexico and Senegal, West Africa.