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Don't soften the goal

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AT A TIME when California high schools are being pressed to impose more rigor and objective measurements for graduation, the University of California is considering a complicated plan that would relax admissions standards and make them more subjective.

The proposal, which UC regents are expected to review later this month, is not only misguided, it would create a far more labor-intensive admissions procedure at a time when the university system is struggling for funds to keep teaching programs afloat.

Under the current requirements, students who complete 15 college-prep courses are guaranteed admission to one of the university system campuses if their grade-point averages and test scores place them in the top 12.5 percent of California public high school graduates.

The proposed changes would reduce to 10 percent the proportion of graduates guaranteed admission. At the same time, however, the proposal would eliminate two of the required tests and guarantee to other students who meet minimal college-readiness standards that their applications would also be reviewed at each campus to which they apply.

In other words, students would undergo less rigorous testing and, while fewer students would be guaranteed admission, more students would be admitted on a subjective basis unrelated to their academic performance. Backers of the plan say that the new standards would lead to admission of a more diverse pool of students. But critics say it

could have just the opposite effect because minorities will be hurt more when students between the 10 and 12.5 percent thresholds are no longer guaranteed admission.

Backers also argue that many high school students miss out at a chance for UC admission because they inadvertently fail to take a required course or exam. If that's a major problem, university officials should address it by providing better outreach to high school students and counselors to ensure that they fully understand the expectations for admission. They should not use that as an excuse for lowering the bar.

The objective here should remain ensuring top-quality UC students. We must not forget that UC is supposed to be a world-class system — the destination for the best of our high school graduates. It should be a training ground for the brightest of our youth, those who will be our leaders of tomorrow. We must not soften that goal.