SAT II language tests at UC

Students seeking to become University of California freshmen through the university’s “statewide eligibility” criteria – rather than through the new “Eligibility in the Local Context,” or “4 percent” program – must submit scores from five standardized tests. These tests are the SAT I verbal, SAT I math, SAT II writing, SAT II math, and a third SAT II test of the student’s choice. This third test can be taken in any one of a number of subject areas, including history, science, literature and foreign language.

UC recently established a new “eligibility index,” consisting of scores on these standardized tests along with grade averages in UC-required high school coursework, that sets the minimum academic standards for UC eligibility in the statewide context. The new index places twice as much weight on the SAT II exams as on the SAT I exams because UC research has found the SAT II tests to be among the best predictors of a student’s academic performance at the university.

Separately, in an effort to encourage greater mastery of high school subject matter among applicants, UC President Richard C. Atkinson has proposed that UC no longer require the SAT I for freshman admission. UC would instead use tests that are more closely aligned with the college preparatory curriculum in high school. For now, Atkinson has suggested that UC use the SAT II subject-based achievement tests, pending the development of other tests even more closely linked to the high school curriculum.

Key points about the SAT II foreign language tests

Recent news stories have questioned the use of the SAT II foreign language tests. Some important points about this issue are:

- **UC’s admissions policies seek to identify students who meet high academic standards and have a high likelihood of succeeding at the university.** These policies do not seek to benefit or disadvantage any particular ethnic group.

- **UC uses the SAT II tests because they are very good predictors of an applicant’s likely academic performance at UC.** In fact, UC research has found that of the five required standardized tests, the SAT II of the student’s choice is second only to the SAT II writing in its “predictive value” – making it a useful tool in assessing academic qualifications.

- **UC research also indicates that very little, if any, change in the ethnic composition of the entering class is attributable to the increased emphasis on the SAT II.** The university compared the same pool of applicants under both sets of eligibility criteria – with and without the weighted SAT II – and found little difference in the ethnic distribution of eligible students.

- **There are, in fact, other likely reasons for this year’s increase in Latino admissions to UC.** The “Eligibility in the Local Context” program was implemented for the first time this year, for instance, and the university also believes its collaborative work with the K-12 schools to help improve academic performance and college preparation is having an impact.

- **Every test “advantages” those students who do well on it; the question is whether the “advantage” is inappropriate.** UC believes the SAT II language tests do not present such a situation because mastery of a second language is an academic qualification that the UC faculty have determined is an important requirement for incoming students. It is reasonable to give students an opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of academic subject matter deemed important for college entrance.

- **UC is, of course, sensitive to any concerns about its admissions process and recognizes that the SAT II language tests raise some issues worthy of discussion.** These issues are being considered as part of a broader faculty review of President Atkinson’s proposal to revise the university’s use of standardized tests.