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California Postsecondary Education Commission

Regional Differences in University Eligibility

In September 2005, the Commission released the latest in its series of university eligibility studies. These studies estimate the percentage of California public high school graduates meeting the minimum admission requirements of the California State University and the University of California. The study presented eligibility rates for the high school graduating class of 2001 based on a sample of nearly 14,000 transcripts collected from 1,100 high schools throughout the state. After the study was released, staff began examining the variation in eligibility between schools and the factors driving this variation.

The Commission's eligibility studies for 1996 and earlier years presented eligibility rates for California regions. These generally showed that university eligibility was highest in the San Francisco Bay area, Orange County, and San Diego County, somewhat lower in Los Angeles County, and lowest in the inland areas and northern California.

Regional estimates from the 2001 study sample confirm this pattern (see table below). However, eligibility varies from school to school depending on school performance and local factors such as income levels in the neighborhood of the school. It may be that the differences in the regional figures are the result of these local factors rather than cultural or geographical differences. For example, eligibility rates are higher in Orange County than in Los Angeles County, but this may be because there are more high-performing schools in more affluent neighborhoods in Orange County than in Los Angeles County.

Staff is examining the effect of regional location on university eligibility. If the analysis shows that regional location has a real effect on eligibility after correcting for school performance and other local factors, then cultural and geographical factors may be significant obstacles to university-going in some regions of California. Should this be the case, policies to encourage more widespread access to UC and CSU should address cultural or geographical differences between regions.

Regional eligibility rates, 2001

Region	Eligibility rate	
	UC	CSU
Orange County	21.7%	40.2%
San Francisco Bay	20.2	40.5
San Diego	19.5	39.9
Central Coast	18.0	36.1
Sacramento-Tahoe	15.8	39.8
Los Angeles/Ventura	14.2	34.8
San Joaquin Valley	9.6	30.4
Inland Empire	9.5	28.8
Northern California	9.0	36.7

Eligibility rates for comprehensive public high schools in each region.

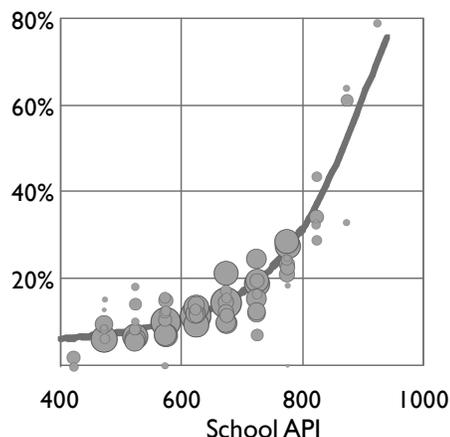
On the other hand, the analysis may show that eligibility is the outcome of school performance and local factors, rather than a school's regional location. In this case, inequities in access are best addressed by policies to improve school performance and preparation of students from poorer neighborhoods regardless of where they live in the state.

Progress of staff work

Staff began the analysis by establishing a relationship between eligibility and school performance. The school Academic Performance Index (API), compiled by the California Department of Education, is a widely-recognized measure of school quality. Eligibility rates are closely related to API. At schools with an API of 500–600, the eligibility rate for UC averages 9.2%. For

Variation of eligibility with school performance

UC eligibility rate



UC eligibility rate plotted against API bracket, based on data from the Commission's 2001 eligibility study. The gray line shows a curve fitted to the data by Commission staff. CSU eligibility also increases with API.

schools in the 600–700 bracket, UC eligibility averages 13.5%. At higher API schools, the UC eligibility rises sharply, reaching 42% for schools in the 850–900 API bracket.

The relationship between API and eligibility was used to see whether regional differences in eligibility persist after adjusting for differences in API and the ethnic composition of schools. Preliminary work is showing that, at least in the coastal areas, regional differences disappear when a correction is made for differences in API and ethnic composition. A student at a high-API school in Los Angeles County is just as likely to be eligible for UC or CSU as a similarly-situated student in Orange County. The overall eligibility rate in Los Angeles County is lower because there are fewer high-API schools in Los Angeles, not because cultural differences between the two counties affect eligibility.

The results show some indication of a real regional effect in the inland areas of California. A student at a school in the San Joaquin Valley may be less likely to be eligible than a student at a school with a similar API in the coastal counties. However, there are no regional difference between the inland regions. The Sacramento area, the San Joaquin Valley, and the Inland Empire all have similar eligibility rates after adjustment for API and ethnic composition.

The next steps will be to examine other factors such as income. Although school API is highly correlated with income in the neighborhood of the school, there may be enough data to separate the effects of these factors. This analysis may help us see if income is the real driver of lower eligibility rates in the inland areas. Other factors under investigation are the size of the urban area of the school to see if there is a tendency for eligibility to be lower in the smaller, more remote communities.

Commission reports on university eligibility

California Postsecondary Education Commission. *University Eligibility Study for the Class of 2001*. September 2005.

California Postsecondary Education Commission. *Eligibility of California's 1996 High School Graduates for Admission to the State's Public Universities*. December 1997.

California Postsecondary Education Commission. *University Eligibility Study for the Class of 2003*. May 2004.