

Tougher classes required under Senate's top 10 percent bill

BRANDI GRISSOM

Associated Press
May 6, 2005 6:52 p.m.

AUSTIN - Students who want automatic admission to Texas universities would have to take tougher courses under a bill approved Friday by the Senate.

The bill would limit admissions under the top 10 percent law to those students who complete the state's recommended or advanced high school programs. Both are considered college preparatory programs.

The current admissions law guarantees all students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their classes admission to the public university of their choice, regardless of the courses they've taken.

"We are giving them an incentive to take those difficult courses," said Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, who sponsored the legislation.

Under the bill, the State Board of Education would be required to adopt a uniform transcript format for schools to transmit information to universities. The Higher Education Coordinating Board would be required to develop a standard method for calculating grade point averages for determining eligibility in the top 10 percent. More weight would be given for advanced courses.

West said the requirements are meant to make the admissions process more fair, giving an advantage to those who take more challenging classes.

The top 10 percent law has come under fire over the last several years. During this legislative session lawmakers have filed bills that would change or even eliminate it.

University administrators and some lawmakers say the law is squeezing out many qualified students, sending them out of state and tying the hands of admissions officials who want to review the whole of students' academic careers.

Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, proposed abolishing the law, saying it is unfair and irrelevant.

"We no longer have a reason to have the top 10 percent law," he said. "It has outlived its usefulness."

The university admissions law was adopted after a 1996 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision made affirmative action illegal in Texas college admissions. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed that decision, allowing universities to use race as one of many decision-making factors.

The law primarily affects the state's flagship universities - the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University in College Station - where enrollment is most selective.

Administrators at UT Austin have long called for change in the top 10 percent law. They say a more holistic approach would allow for more accurate assessment of student qualifications.

More than 60 percent of the 2004 UT Austin freshman class was admitted under the law. At A&M, about 47 percent of 2004 freshmen class were top 10 percent graduates.

The presidents of both universities have recommended keeping the law but implementing a cap on the number of students who could be admitted under it. A bill that would do just that was approved this week by a House education committee.

The bill the Senate approved Friday now goes to that committee for its consideration.

During 2003, however, West and Sen. Leticia Van de Putte successfully filibustered similar legislation.

Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin, said the current law is doing what it was meant to do - increasing diversity, both ethnically and geographically, at Texas universities.

And top 10 percent students are outperforming their peers, said Sen. Kip Averitt, D-Waco.

"Students who get into the University of Texas at Austin under the top 10 percent rule have higher GPAs than students who are admitted otherwise," Averitt said. "I think that says our best and brightest are being admitted to our universities."

The Top 10 percent bill is SB333.

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