

## Top 10 percent rule closer to change

By Brandi Grissom / Austin Bureau

Posted: 03/05/2009 12:00:00 AM MST

AUSTIN -- Parkland High School graduate Choquette "Cookie" Peterson would never have applied to the state's top public university if it weren't for the law to boost diversity on campus.

So Peterson, now pursuing a Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin, said Wednesday that she hoped lawmakers did not change the so-called top 10 percent rule.

"I would not have been admitted without it," she said.

A panel of state senators on Wednesday approved a measure that would change the law that allows students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high-school class automatic admission to the public university of their choice.

The measure, which must still pass the full Senate and House, would limit automatic admission of top 10 percent graduates to half of a university's incoming freshman class.

About 81 percent of this year's freshmen at UT Austin were admitted as top 10 percent students, said university President Bill Powers. In just a few years, he said, the school will have no room for any other applicants if the law is not changed.

"It is a crisis on our campus right now," Powers said.

Peterson and other proponents of the top 10 percent rule say it has increased racial and geographic diversity at UT Austin. They worry that changing the law would reverse those gains.

UT officials counter that the rule forces the school to accept more students than it can handle. They also say it is hurting diversity because UT Austin must select the majority of students based on a single factor -- their grade point average.

Texas lawmakers adopted the top 10 percent system in 1997 after a 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling prohibited the consideration of race in college admissions. It was intended to be a merit-based

selection process that would increase the number of students from minority groups and rural areas at the state's top schools.

From 1998 through 2008, the percentage of Hispanic students in the freshman class at UT Austin grew from 13 percent to 20 percent, university records show. Enrollment of black students increased from 3 percent to 6 percent.

"What we're seeing now is that UT is the most diverse it's ever been in the history of that university," said state Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, a supporter of the top 10 percent law.

Powers, though, said the law became unnecessary after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that universities could use race as one of many criteria in admission decisions. UT now considers students' ethnicity as part of the process, he said.

"We are absolutely committed to diversity on our campus," Powers said.

He said the top 10 percent rule is squeezing out students of all backgrounds who might otherwise be qualified to attend UT.

"There is virtually no chance of getting into the University of Texas if you're not in the top 10 percent," Powers said.

Nancy Evans, director of college readiness at El Paso Independent School District, said students are well aware of how critical that top 10 percent is if they want a chance to attend UT or Texas A&M University.

Students will often take courses they know they can ace or ones that will add points to their GPA rather than challenge themselves, she said, because a bad grade could ruin their chances.

"The emphasis on that GPA prevents students getting the best academic preparation they can get," Evans said.

Luis Figueroa, legislative attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said one reason for the capacity problem at UT was that the school reduced its enrollment at the same time applications were increasing.

Allowing universities to choose a portion of their students based on criteria other than class rank, he said, gives an unfair advantage to

Anglo students who are likely to have access to better schools and more resources.

"It opens the door to white students at far greater rates than any other race and ethnicity," Figueroa said.

He said changing the top 10 percent rule is a shortsighted solution to the state's bigger problem, which is a lack of top-notch universities.

Parkland High graduate Peterson said the best solution for Texas would be to increase funding for schools such as the University of Texas at El Paso so that they could become more prestigious. That would reduce the demand and fierce competition at UT Austin and Texas A&M.

"UTEP could be one of those institutions, and that could give students of color a lot more opportunity," Peterson said.

Mary Gonzalez, a Clint High School and UT Austin graduate, said the top 10 percent rule has created an environment of hope for students like her.

"If it's working," she said, "why cap it?"

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