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Panel debates 10 percent rule

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AUSTIN - Some lawmakers demanded better results on minority college enrollment Thursday, while others called for the easing of an admissions rule that they say is overwhelming the state's largest university.

At a state legislative hearing, senators reviewed the stagnant enrollment rates of blacks and Hispanics at the state's flagship universities since 1997. That is the year the Legislature ordered state universities to accept applicants who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class.

In 1997, black and Hispanic enrollment was 17 percent at the University of Texas at Austin and 13 percent at Texas A&M University. In fall 2003, black and Hispanic enrollment was 16 percent at UT and 11 percent at Texas A&M.

Still, the 10 percenters are filling UT's student body -- they are expected to make up 65 percent of the fall 2004 freshman class -- and are leaving admission officials little room to form the best class possible for the university, officials said. Educators suggested capping the number of 10 percent students that UT is required to automatically admit.

Sen. Kyle Janek, R-Houston, said the 10 percent rule forces good students at academically rigorous high schools to leave the state because they cannot get into UT and Texas A&M.

But Marta Tienda, the lead scholar at the Texas Top 10 Percent Project, said the number of qualified students who cannot get into the flagship universities because of the top 10 percent rule is not nearly as dramatic as many people assert.

"The evidence shows that those who are leaving the state are leaving because they want to go," she said.

State senators pressured university officials to step up minority enrollments that are far below Texas' black and Hispanic representation. In the 2000 census, Hispanics made up 32 percent of the state population, blacks 11.6 percent.

"I've been listening to these promises for almost 10 years, and guess what, you stayed stagnant," Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, told university officials. "I'm scared to death that we aren't going to be prepared."

Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, chairman of the higher education subcommittee, said he is bothered by constant talk of restoring minority enrollment to what it was before affirmative action was banned.

"That was mediocrity then," he said.

Experts testified Thursday that Hispanic enrollment at flagship universities increased slightly, partially because Texas' Hispanic population has increased rapidly in recent years. University officials conceded that they have come up short on attracting more black students.

"We have a very poor record of attracting African-American students to A&M. We think that has to be remedied," Texas A&M System Regent Earl Nye said. "We've got precious little to be proud of."

Only 3 percent of the College Station campus is black.

UT had slightly more black students, but about the same percentage.

"Our success with African-Americans has been a disappointment," said Bruce Walker, UT vice provost and director of admissions.

West pressed officials to have more blacks involved in committees studying the problem.

Both universities are working with high schools that have traditionally sent few or no students to their campuses. They're visiting the high schools for recruiting drives and offering generous scholarships to the best students.

The 10 percent rule was created by the Legislature in 1997 to help boost black and Hispanic enrollment at UT and A&M a year after a court ruling banned the flagship universities from practicing affirmative action.

That ruling was effectively overturned by a Supreme Court ruling in June 2003.

Tienda, a Princeton University sociologist who has been studying Texas flagship enrollments for several years, urged officials to continue the scholarships and outreach.

She also suggested a cap on the top 10 percent rule for UT or other state universities if they start accepting more than 50 percent of these students. She said special admission preference should be given to top 10 percent students from the underrepresented high schools.

Tienda said the 10 percent rule is not hurting students in wealthy high schools nearly as much as some say, but others said the rule is forcing good students to seek college degrees out of state.

One man drove from Houston to testify that the 10 percent rule robbed his son, whom he described as an excellent student, of his dream of attending UT.

Some black and Hispanic UT students waited hours to testify in favor of the plan, saying it gave them an opportunity they would not otherwise have had.

"I believe students like myself should not be reprimanded for the lack of resources within our high schools," said Erika Gutierrez, 20, a UT junior majoring in business.

The Laredo native said she was automatically admitted under the 10 percent plan and received one of the scholarships for students at underrepresented high schools.

17% black, Hispanic enrollment in 1997 at the University of Texas at Austin

16% black, Hispanic enrollment at the same campus in 2003

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