

November 23, 2012

To: Darnell Hunt, UCLA
From: David Stern, UC Berkeley
Re: Are there racial disparities in UCLA freshman admissions?

Thank you for inviting me to comment on “The Consideration of Race in UCLA Undergraduate Admissions” by Richard Sander (Oct 20, 2012), and “Faculty Letter Misrepresents Mare Report’s Finding” by Tim Groseclose (Nov 9, 2012).

I will not attempt a detailed analysis of either of these documents here, but I will offer four comments. The third and fourth comments repeat and elaborate observations I made on Dec 9, 2011 in response to the Mare report, which I was asked to review by CUARS because (as you know) I had been chair of undergraduate admissions at Berkeley (AEPE) when we commissioned the Hout report on which the Mare report was modeled.

1. Focusing on individual regression coefficients can be misleading.

Professor Groseclose’s article emphasizes the statistical significance of three coefficients in Mare’s Table 10. These coefficients appear to indicate that aspects of the admission process favor black applicants. However, Groseclose ignores the statistically significant coefficient in column A of that table, which indicates that being black is associated with a *less* favorable score in Regular Review, the important first stage of the process. Professor Sander does take note of that result. In his report, Professor Mare cautions that the ethnic coefficients in the regressions predicting Regular Review scores “do not provide an adequate picture of ethnic variation” in the admissions process (page 57), because the process has several stages, and because the most accurate estimation models are highly nonlinear (the Mare report does not actually show coefficients for the multinomial logit models).

2. Professor Sander’s results contain apparent anomalies.

Sander’s Table 8 shows admission rates by race and holistic score, for the combined years 2007-2009. The anomalies are evident in the Total column, which records an overall admit rate of 97% for applicants scored 1, 99% for those scored 1.5, 93% for those receiving a score of 2, and 95% for those with scores of 2.25. It seems anomalous that the admit rate is higher for applicants with scores of 1.5 than for those with scores of 1 (the best possible score), and similarly that a score of 2.25 gives a higher admit rate than a score of 2. Mare’s Table 6, for 2008, does show a considerably higher admit rate in Theater and Film for applicants with scores of 2.25 than with scores of 2. But in Letters and Sciences, Mare’s Table 7 shows 100% of applicants admitted if they had scores of 2.25 or better. Apparently Sander’s analysis uses results for all colleges. But conflating results for all colleges overlooks some important differences among them. For instance, Mare’s analysis reflects the fact that Supplemental Review is used only in

Letters and Sciences (his Table 5). More detailed analysis would be necessary to explain the apparent anomalies in Sander's Table 8.

3. The calculation of “adjusted disparities” depends not only on the average characteristics of different groups, but also on how these characteristics are valued in the admission process.

My only serious concern about Mare's study is the analysis of “Admission Disparities among Ethnic Identity Groups,” in section 10. I conveyed this concern to CUARS as part of my review, and will repeat and extend the explanation here.

Mare's analysis found that the UCLA process has the effect of increasing the proportions of Black and Latino students, as measured by positive “adjusted disparities.”

“Adjusted disparity” is the difference between (i) the number of students in a group who would be admitted if they had the characteristics of average applicants — given the way the admission process values various characteristics — and (ii) the number who would be admitted if admit rates were the same for all groups. As stated in point 8 of Mare's Executive Summary, “Among otherwise equivalent applicants, Whites, African Americans, and Latinos are overrepresented among those admitted and Asian American applicants are underrepresented.”

In other words, if white, black, and Latino applicants had the same characteristics as the average applicant, and if those characteristics continued to be valued as they currently are, then UCLA would be admitting larger numbers of White, Black, and Latino students.

But, in fact, black and Latino applicants have less of the characteristics (mainly high grades and test scores) that are most valued in the admission process. Therefore, they are actually admitted at lower rates than other groups, giving rise to the negative “disparity” in Tables 11 and 12.

Whether UCLA should be content with positive “adjusted disparities” along with negative unadjusted “disparities” for blacks and Latinos is a matter of opinion.

Those who oppose racial affirmative action, such as Professors Sander and Groseclose, would deplore the positive “adjusted disparities.” They would argue that parity in admissions — equal admission rates among ethnic identity groups — is something that has to be earned, by under-represented groups bringing stronger qualifications for consideration.

On the other hand, some would argue that the adjusted disparities result from an excessively narrow definition of merit. They could claim that the measure of “adjusted disparity” is flawed because the predicted admission rates of applicants with different characteristics depend entirely on how those characteristics are valued. Among the characteristics that could be said to be under-valued are the contributions of applicants to

their high schools or communities, and the extent to which applicants have overcome obstacles to achievement.

4. Giving greater consideration to applicants who have overcome obstacles

The UCLA “Undergraduate Admissions Criteria – Fall 2008” states a “commitment to identifying talented and motivated students who have overcome the obstacles of limited educational and family resources.” The policy includes consideration of “opportunities” and “challenges” as two of the eight enumerated criteria for judging applicants.

However, the results in Mare’s report show that overcoming obstacles actually counts for very little in the UCLA admission process. Tables 9 and 10, along with Figure 3, show that low income, low parental education, participation in outreach programs, having to work while in high school to support the family, and a measure of obstacles coded as “limits to achievement” may be given some favorable consideration in some phases of the process, particularly Supplemental Review. However, at the critical first phase of Regular Review these variables either have no effect or their effect is overwhelmed by the effect of grades and test scores. The relative size of effects is indicated by Z statistics for the ordered logit coefficients in Tables 9 or 10, and by the graphs showing results from the more precise multinomial logit model in Figure 3: compare Figures 3a through 3f with Figures 3r through 3t. As Mare concludes on page 80, the socioeconomic effects are small.

Column A of Table 10 indicates that, when measures of academic achievement are taken into account, neither low family income nor low parental education contributes to a more favorable read score in Regular Review. And, as noted above, at this stage being black or Latino is significantly associated with *less* favorable scores — controlling for academic achievement and all other observed characteristics of applicants.

The admission process could give much more weight to whether students have overcome obstacles. This could be done by instructing readers to give greater weight to this factor in Regular Review, not rely so heavily on Supplemental Review.

A more systematic approach would be to show grades and test scores as percentiles within socioeconomic groups — just as they are now shown as percentiles among applicants from the same high school. Applicants could be grouped by family income (adjusted for family size) and parental education, and their grades and test scores could be considered as percentiles within their group. That information could be put on the readsheets — alongside the percentiles showing where an applicant’s grades and test scores stand in relation to applicants from the same high school.

If the admission process put greater weight on overcoming obstacles than it does now, predictions of the number of admits based on different characteristics would change. The positive “adjusted disparities” for black and Latino students would diminish to the extent that these students score well within their socioeconomic groups. Even if the “adjusted

disparities” for blacks and Latinos did not diminish, putting more weight on overcoming obstacles would presumably result in admitting larger numbers of talented and motivated students from low socioeconomic groups — itself one of the goals of UCLA’s freshman admission policy.