



Everything New Orleans

Stricter college admissions rules could keep many local high school graduates out

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By

Despite gains in student performance in many New Orleans schools, in two years most of the city's public high school graduates might no longer qualify to attend any of Louisiana's public universities immediately after graduation. The reason is more stringent college admissions requirements to be phased in over the next two years.



Enlarge

Chris Granger, The Times-Picayune

CHRIS GRANGER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE Students in instructor Malene Davis' Intro to Anatomy and Physiology class listen to her lecture on Tuesday, September 20, 2011 at Delgado Community College in New Orleans.

College admission requirements changing gallery (5 photos)

As of 2014, the state's four-year universities will no longer accept students who require even a single remedial course. Recent data show that a majority of New Orleans high school students still require at least one remedial course based on their ACT scores -- and that's just counting the students who take the ACT. In 2009, roughly 500 New Orleans students would have been affected by the new standards.

Skeptics of the shift call it par for the course in a state whose college admission and state scholarship policies have long seemed stacked against low-income, minority students.

Defenders say the state needs to do something to boost abysmal graduation

rates at state universities, which have sunk as low as 8 percent in one case. They say the changes put Louisiana in line with other states that use community colleges to help under-prepared students before sending them on to four-year institutions.

'I don't think we can enough fast enough'

The changes will have considerable impact in New Orleans, where the average composite ACT score for public school students this year was 18 on a 36-point scale. Although that figure has been inching up in recent years, it's still not high enough for most students to avoid remedial courses: for that, students need at least an 18 in English and a 19 in math.

"I don't think we can do enough fast enough so that in 2014 we have a large enough percentage ready to enroll in four-year institutions," said Jill Zimmerman, a policy research analyst at Tulane's Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives.

Nationally, schools of all types serving low-income students have struggled to boost average ACT scores, which are closely correlated to income. But the scores will be a crucial test of the city's post-Katrina school landscape: Even if schools demonstrate sustained improvement on the state's standardized tests, those results will be comparatively meaningless if students are unprepared for college-level work.

Pre- and post-Katrina college attendance and graduation rates in the city have been uninspiring.

Those who say Louisiana's higher education system is unfair to the poor often cite as evidence the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students, or TOPS, which provides any Louisiana high school student who earns a 2.5 grade-point average and scores at least a 20 on the ACT with a full scholarship to a public university in the state.

A report from the nonpartisan **Louisiana Budget Project** last winter concluded that much of the \$1.25 billion the state has spent on TOPS in the past 12 years goes to "those who need it least."

Specifically, **the report** found that 72 percent of TOPS recipients come from families that make more than \$50,000, and nearly 40 percent come from families with incomes in the six figures. Thus the politically popular program is a reinforcer of existing class divisions rather than an engine of social mobility.

TOPS money is defended

But Gov. Bobby Jindal's chief of staff, Steven Waguespack, maintains that the program has helped all Louisianans.

"TOPS is an option for every Louisiana child and has opened the door of economic opportunity for children all across the state regardless of their family's income level or the community they come from," he said in a prepared statement. "Since the program's inception, TOPS has enabled nearly half a million students to attend college who might not have otherwise been able to do so. "

Still, most states devote a far higher percentage of their scholarship pool to need-based aid than Louisiana. Nationwide, states spend 23 percent of their aid on merit-based programs, and 59 percent on need-based. Louisiana, by contrast, spent 81 percent on merit-based and 17 percent on need-based programs in 2008, according to the Louisiana Budget Project report. That year, the number of white TOPS recipients

outnumbered the number of black students by 7 to 1 in a state where the population ratio of white to black is roughly 2-to-1.

The state also has a smaller, but growing, need-based scholarship program called the Go Grants.

The racial composition of the Regents has also come under fire in the last year. Just one of the board's 15 members appointed by Jindal is black.

'It's going to keep out a good chunk of kids'

New Orleans counselors worry the changed admissions requirements might make admission to four-year institutions more of a "middle-class entitlement," because it will hinge so much on ACT scores.

"For the time being, it's going to keep out a good chunk of kids," said Nicole Cummins, who provides high school and college advice to alumni of KIPP McDonogh 15 after they have graduated from middle school. But she added: "If we've done our job well, we should have fewer and fewer students who have to worry about this."

Theresa Hay, the Regents' associate commissioner for strategic initiatives, said when the first round of admissions standards was implemented in 2005, it affected far fewer students than the state had estimated. "Students will achieve and will rise to the standards that are expected of them," she said.

The Regents have not put together any estimates for how many students will be affected when the ban on remedial courses takes full effect in 2014.

Under the state's current policy, students can attend regional, four-year universities in the state system -- like Grambling, SUNO, and Nicholls -- if they need one remedial course. That flexibility will disappear in 2014.

Delgado expects to get more students

Delgado Community College, which this year enrolls a record 20,000-plus students, anticipates gaining between 1,000 to 1,500 students because of the new requirements. A whopping 78 percent of Delgado's new students this year are taking remedial classes.

Harold Gaspard, Delgado's provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs, called the number of students requiring remedials "heartbreaking."

Because Delgado has no admissions requirements, it will bear the brunt of the influx locally.

But several partnerships between community colleges and four-year regional institutions will still be permitted, and should allay the impact of the changes.

Grambling State University, for instance, has a year-old partnership with Bossier Parish Community College

that allows students to pursue four-year degrees at Grambling while simultaneously completing their remedial courses at the community college. Several other comparable partnerships exist between the state's community colleges and regional four-year institutions.

SUNO has started a program called Summer Bridge that allows students to take remedial coursework before their freshman year.

The state has agreements in place designed to ensure that credits earned at a community college transfer to four-year institutions.

Tests are debated

Nationally, there's still considerable debate about the extent to which the ACT and SAT predict college success.

Data included in "Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities" showed that high school grade-point average was a much better predictor of college success than SAT and ACT scores. But the research looked at students who met a minimum threshold on the ACT, so it might not be as applicable in New Orleans.

Hay, the associate commissioner for the Regents, said internal research has showed that students who do not require remedial courses are much more likely to remain enrolled at the state's four-year institutions. Specifically, 2006 data showed that about 49 percent of students who needed a remedial course still attended a state university four years after enrolling, compared with 70 percent who did not need a remedial course.

Louisiana's Commissioner of Higher Education Jim Purcell said the state is joining a national effort to eliminate remedial courses at four-year universities. "I'm quite proud that Louisiana is way ahead of the curve when it comes to its policies surrounding this," he said.

Students chime in

But local high school students were more wary of the changes.

Ricky Wyman, a 17-year-old senior at Sci Academy, said, "It's kind of lazy on the part of the college to say you can't come because you have to take extra courses." He said helping "students learn the subjects where they are weak is kind of the point of college."

The new requirements would not affect Wyman because he scored in the 20s on the ACT. But he said some of his classmates who score lower will likely do just as well in college because they "work very hard in class and on their homework... Basically the ACTs are about how good you are at taking standardized tests."

Brandon Garrett, an 18-year-old junior at the International High School of New Orleans, said he believes

college admissions should hinge much more on demonstrated work ethic than a test score.

"If you work and try really hard for something, and that's the best you can do, then they should let you in," he said.

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