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Ensuring Diversity under Race-Neutral Admissions at the University of Georgia

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The University of Georgia (UGA) is the oldest state-chartered public university in the country, founded in 1785. Located in Athens, Georgia, an hour outside Atlanta, the school has grown in both size and selectivity in recent years. UGA enrolls more than 26,000 undergraduates and 9,000 graduate and professional students in seventeen different colleges and schools. Approximately 85 percent of freshmen are residents of Georgia, and the academic competitiveness of the students has grown in each of the past twenty years. UGA now admits about 56 percent of its roughly 20,000 applicants each year, down from 75 percent in 2003, and enrolls almost half of those to whom it makes offers of admission.¹

Ensuring that students of all backgrounds have access to this leading public university and securing the educational benefits of a diverse student body have been persistent challenges at UGA. After more than a century as a white-only institution, the university was legally desegregated in the early 1960s and began enrolling an increasing proportion of African American students

over the next three decades under a federally mandated affirmative action plan. In 2000, however, legal challenges to the university's consideration of race led UGA to adopt race-neutral admissions.

The loss of race-based affirmative action in admissions was an obstacle to achieving UGA's diversity goals, to be sure. But in the decade following this transition, the University of Georgia developed new strategies for recruiting a diverse student body and enhanced the variety of factors considered when thinking about diversity. While UGA continues to assess and improve the strategies it uses to prepare, recruit, and enroll students, the years since 2000 have shown the university moving in the right direction, toward increased racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, and geographic diversity on campus.

A History of Diversity at UGA

Like many Southern institutions, the University of Georgia has a checkered past in terms of promoting diversity. UGA was created as a white-only, male-only institution, providing education to the sons of the state's white planters. Women were not admitted until the early 1900s. And the university did not enroll its first black students until after nearly 180 years of serving only white students. Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter, distinguished top graduates from an all-black high school in Atlanta, enrolled at UGA in 1961. A federal judge had ordered them to be admitted, a decision that followed nearly a decade of legal battles to enroll black students at the university. Holmes and Hunter entered campus amid students chanting, "Two-four-six-eight! We don't want to integrate!" Mobs throwing bottles and bricks had to be dispersed with police force and tear gas.²

Following this rocky desegregation, UGA operated for three decades with a federally mandated two-tiered admissions program. Black and white students were admitted through separate admissions processes, with lower academic requirements in the admissions pathway for black students. This two-tiered process was quite successful at increasing black enrollment on campus. By 1995, a record 12 percent of the enrolling freshman class was African American. And attitudes toward desegregation at the university had shifted sharply. In 1988, the university invited Charlayne Hunter to campus to give the commencement address.³

After federal desegregation requirements had been met, UGA began in the mid-1990s to look at replacing the court-ordered two-tiered

admissions standard with a single admissions program that would still take race into consideration. In 1996, UGA adopted the Total Student Index, an admissions formula which included race as a factor.⁴ Admissions staff felt that a formula-based system was the most efficient way to meet the university's diversity goals with a small crew of admissions officers.

The formula-based plan, however, quickly faced numerous legal challenges. The university signed a consent decree to drop the consideration of race in scholarships, settling some of the complaints that had been raised about their aid policies. And in July 2000, U.S. District Judge Avant B. Edenfield ruled that UGA's formula-based plan was unconstitutional.⁵ A 2001 appellate decision upheld the ruling, finding that UGA's particular admissions policy was unconstitutional because the use of race/ethnicity was not narrowly tailored.⁶ The judges wrote: "A policy that mechanically awards an arbitrary 'diversity' bonus to each and every non-white applicant at a decisive stage in the admissions process, and severely limits the range of other factors relevant to diversity that may be considered at that stage, fails strict scrutiny and violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment."⁷

In response to these challenges, UGA voluntarily dropped the consideration of race, ethnicity, and gender in admissions in 2000 and decided in 2006 to make race-neutral admissions a permanent policy. Despite some discussion about reinstating consideration of race and ethnicity after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Grutter* and *Gratz* in 2003, the university ultimately decided to continue with race- and ethnicity-neutral admissions, fearing further legal challenges.

Diversity Policies under Race-Neutral Admissions

Since 2000, UGA has worked to develop a number of race-neutral methods to promote diversity on campus. Finding new strategies has not been easy, and there is no silver bullet. But the university has pursued a variety of complementary strategies that together have helped encourage diverse enrollment.

Broadening the Definition of Diversity

One of the first steps in crafting race-neutral diversity strategies at UGA was to launch discussions among faculty and staff about the definition and value of diversity. The university's attitude towards racial and ethnic diversity has evolved as Georgia's population has changed. During the

era of desegregation at UGA, diversity was viewed as a black-and-white issue, and the university focused its efforts on increasing the representation of African-American students on campus. In the past two decades, however, the state's Hispanic population has grown, and international immigration has increased. UGA has strengthened its efforts to attract students from these minority groups.

In addition, conversations that grew out of the transition to race-neutral admissions led faculty at UGA to broaden their view of diverse enrollment to include factors such as geography, home language, and life experiences. Accordingly, while the university has continued to stress providing access to African-American students, UGA has also launched a number of efforts to increase diversity across other demographics, beginning by increasing the non-academic factors considered in admission, while still remaining race-neutral.

Revising Admissions Criteria

As the University of Georgia switched to race-neutral admissions, faculty and staff reassessed admissions policies. UGA added a number of socioeconomic considerations, created an admissions pathway for top graduates from across the state to encourage geographic diversity, and removed the consideration of alumni relation.

Starting with the class enrolling in fall 2004, UGA implemented a new admissions policy that contained a longer application form, more space for essays, and a new teacher recommendation requirement. Under the new process, 75 percent to 80 percent of students would be admitted based on academics alone, but the rest of the class would be admitted with additional socioeconomic and non-academic factors, such as parents' educational background, job and family responsibilities, high school environment, "exceptional circumstances," "intellectual curiosity, integrity, personal maturity, creativity, commitment to service and citizenship, ability to overcome hardship and respect for cultural differences."⁸ These additional factors have allowed admissions officers to give a leg up to students who are from low-socioeconomic backgrounds or have faced other challenging life circumstances, in recognition of the obstacles those students have overcome on the road to academic success.

Starting in 2000, UGA also began guaranteeing admission for the valedictorian and salutatorian from each fully accredited high school in Georgia.⁹ This policy encourages geographic diversity and helps recruit talented students from under-resourced high schools.

In addition, after switching to race-neutral admissions, UGA decided that legacy status for relatives of alumni should also no longer be a factor. By definition, such preferences indirectly disadvantage first-generation college students, and, given the history of segregation at UGA, comparatively few students of color benefitted from the program. Acting on the advice of a faculty committee, university president Michael F. Adams eliminated legacy preferences in 2002.¹⁰ The decision was opposed by many among the university's more than a quarter of a million living alumni; however, UGA has stuck by this decision as an important part of its commitment to equitable access and has not encountered noticeable fundraising challenges as a result of the change.

Increasing Recruitment

After dropping the consideration of race/ethnicity in admissions, UGA increased targeted recruitment of underrepresented minorities and low-income students through a number of initiatives. In 2001–02, the university created the Office of Institutional Diversity and opened a new satellite recruitment office to help recruit students from historically underrepresented populations. A second satellite recruitment office opened the following year.¹¹ In 2004, the admissions office purchased recruiting lists for over nine thousand “multicultural high school students” to aid with recruitment.¹² Admissions counselors also increased their work at college fairs and offered weekend information sessions.¹³

UGA has also targeted specific high schools in order to boost recruitment of underrepresented populations. Through the Georgia Incentive Schools program, UGA provides special recruitment events for students at a set of about fifty public high schools across the state identified as having high percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch and low rates of students applying to UGA. The university also offers limited scholarships for students admitted from these schools.

Strengthening the Pipeline of Applicants

Bolstered recruitment is an important tool for reaching academically competitive disadvantaged students who might not be aware of their college options; however, large achievement gaps at the K–12 level remain a central challenge to diversifying enrollment. Academic factors such as students' grades, rigor of curriculum, and test scores continue to be major admissions considerations that limit the pool of competitive applicants. For example, the twenty-fifth to seventy-fifth percentile range of combined math and verbal SAT scores at UGA is 1200 to 1450, and

students who score below 1000 are at risk of failing to meet the University of Georgia System's required cutoffs for remediation. However, out of about 30,000 African American graduates from Georgia high schools, only 20,000 take the SAT. Out of those, only about 20 percent score above 1000 on the math and verbal portions of the exam. Thus, as admissions officers work to build a freshman class of over 5,000 students, there are only about 4,000 African American graduates across the state meeting this particular baseline qualification—and many of these students are considering multiple college options.

Propelled by these sobering statistics, the University of Georgia has pledged to increase the number of Georgia high school students who will be competitive applicants at a research university. To achieve this goal, UGA has begun forming partnerships with K–12 schools long before the senior year of high school.

Through the Gear Up for College program, partially funded by The Goizueta Foundation, UGA brings middle school students from targeted school systems to campus. Admissions officers highlight different aspects of campus life and research, building excitement about college, and explaining the steps needed to climb the path to freshman year. A second program, Road to College, sends UGA staff into middle schools across the state that the university has identified based on their diverse student populations. UGA representatives lead parent programs and offer leadership training for students at the schools, making a special effort to reach non-English-speaking families. The university hopes that efforts like these will help increase the number of Georgia students ready for competitive colleges like UGA.

UGA alumni have also proven to be a valuable resource in promoting college readiness among the state's secondary students. As part of the National College Advising Corp, UGA places recent graduates in targeted high schools to act as college advisors to the students. Low-income students may not be planning on taking required standardized tests and applying to college. Recent alumni can encourage them by sharing their first-hand experiences and making them aware of the resources available to low-income students, such as fee waivers for testing and college applications.

Ensuring Financial Support

UGA is also conscious of the role that financial aid plays in recruiting low-income students to campus and encouraging their success once enrolled. Georgia's statewide lottery-funded scholarship program has served as a useful hook for attracting disadvantaged students to the University of

Georgia. Since 1993, the state of Georgia has offered the HOPE Scholarship for all graduates of Georgia high schools with a B average or better, and it recently added a second scholarship, the Zell Miller. HOPE and Zell Miller provide generous funding toward tuition at both public and private colleges in the state. More than 97 percent of in-state freshmen at UGA arrive on campus funded by these scholarships, which cover a large percentage of the tuition costs. The HOPE and Zell Miller scholarships are not means tested, serving as strong incentives for students of all incomes to attend college in state. However, they send a particularly strong message to low-income students, who might otherwise be deterred from applying to UGA because of the cost of attendance.

Although facing tight budget constraints, the University of Georgia has also introduced scholarships to attract and support underrepresented populations. In 2006, the university started the One UGA Scholarship, awarded each year to thirty-five to forty students who “provide diversity to UGA based on the University’s broad definition of diversity.” The award is \$1,500 per year and is renewable.¹⁴ In addition, in 2012 UGA launched the Gateway to Georgia Scholarship Campaign to raise endowment funds for need-based as well as academic scholarships, in order to help with recruitment efforts.

Results

After a rocky start, the University of Georgia has seen some success over the past decade in increasing diversity on campus across a variety of measures.

Increasing African-American representation has been challenging. The percentage of African-American students at UGA began to drop in the mid-1990s with the transition away from two-track admissions. Negative media coverage of the legal challenges to UGA’s use of race in admissions also contributed to a decrease in applications from African-American students and a lower yield of admitted applicants deciding to attend. From a high of 12 percent in 1995, the percentage of new African American students enrolling at UGA reached a low of less than 5 percent in 2001. While the percentage of African American students on campus is still lower than it was at its peak, the university is moving in the right direction. About 9 percent of the freshmen that enrolled in fall 2011 were African American. Furthermore, it is an important accomplishment that the absolute numbers of African-American students on campus have grown at the same time that academic standards for admission have risen. UGA’s freshman class has grown from about 3,700 students

in 1995 to 5,200 students in 2013, while average SAT math and verbal scores have risen from 1190 to 1282, and average GPA has increased from 3.55 to 3.94. Equally important, the university has had impressive results encouraging the success of its African American students. For ten of the past fifteen years, the first-year retention rate for African American students on campus has outpaced UGA's overall average, which was an impressive 94 percent as of 2012.¹⁵ While six-year graduation rates for African American students are currently below the university's overall average of 83.1 percent, they have risen considerably over the past decade, from 67 percent for the cohort starting in 1998 to 76.1 percent for the 2007 cohort.

Enrollment and success rates for other racial or ethnic minority groups have also increased in the past decade. As the state of Georgia's Hispanic population has increased, so has the percentage of Hispanic students on UGA's campus, growing from less than 1 percent in the mid-1990s to over 5 percent in 2012.¹⁶ First-year retention rates for Hispanic students have been above 90 percent since 2008, and the six-year graduation rate for Hispanic students is 81.4 percent for the 2007 cohort, close to the university's overall average of 83.1 percent. And while UGA's freshman class was 86 percent White in 2001, that figure had dropped to 73 percent in 2012.¹⁷

Furthermore, with a broader definition of diversity and a variety of admissions and recruitment strategies, UGA's campus has become more diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, home language, geography, and cultural origin. As of fall 2013, 7 percent of enrolling freshmen were non-native English speakers, and 6 percent were the first in their family to attend college. Whereas UGA was in the past sometimes referred to as the "University of North Atlanta" because of the predominance of white upper-middle-class students, today the university is more reflective of the state population economically and geographically. To take one measure, the number of Georgia high schools represented in the freshman class at UGA has increased by more than 30 percent, from 347 high schools in 2002 to 457 in 2012.¹⁸

Conclusion

Faculty and administration at the University of Georgia remain committed to pursuing diversity on campus through a variety of different routes, strengthening the strategies already identified and working to find new ways to build the pipeline of applicants and reach qualified

students of all backgrounds. The transition to race-neutral admissions has been challenging, and increasing representation of African-American students remains an area of focus. However, the transition has also pushed the university toward a broader understanding of diversity and a more proactive approach to ensuring equitable access and creating a rich learning environment.

Meanwhile, alongside the admissions office's targeted efforts, some of the most effective tools for continuing to increase campus diversity are the informal, word-of-mouth testimonials of UGA's satisfied students and alumni. As more students of color, low-income and first-generation students, non-native English speakers, and students from underrepresented high schools enroll at UGA and have positive experiences, the stories that they share with family, friends, and classmates help draw more students to campus. These include some students who may never before have seen UGA in their future.