

July 24, 2021

The Atlantic

Washington, D.C.

Re: "The University of California Is Lying to Us," by Caitlin Flanagan

Dear Editor,

Caitlin Flanagan's [July 22](#) article provided a powerful broadside against the elimination of standardized tests in University of California undergraduate admissions. Unfortunately, her article hinges on several factually incorrect claims about the operation of UC admissions.

First, UC does not 'evaluate test scores "in local context"' for eligibility purposes, as the article states; UC's Eligibility in the Local Context program evaluates students using *only* high school grades. You don't "just need to be a top test taker within your own school" to be guaranteed UC admission; tests have never mattered for local UC eligibility.

Second, Flanagan states that "good grades in other classes [not used for UC eligibility] don't count." This confuses UC eligibility, which grants access only to UC Merced, and UC admission, which gets students into UC's more-selective campuses. Good grades in other classes *do* count for admission at every UC campus.

Third, Flanagan states that "the course-load requirement could be waived for those who did well enough on the SAT". This is not true; in order for students to be UC-eligible for the statewide guarantee, they must also fulfill UC's course-load requirement (called "A-G").

Finally, and most importantly, Flanagan writes that 'in 2018, about 22,000 students "tested in" to the UC'. This is not accurate: while 12,000 students who were rejected from every UC campus to which they applied were instead offered admission to UC Merced (to which they had *not* applied) on the basis of both their high school grades and test scores, fewer than 200 of those students actually enrolled at UC Merced. This is hardly the "lifeline" Flanagan makes it out to be. In sum, Flanagan's argument hinges on important misunderstandings of University of California admissions.

Sincerely,



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Supporting Details

Below, I discuss each of these factual inaccuracies in turn. **First**, the article claims that:

"One of the ways the UC system found to work around the state's ban on affirmative action was to evaluate test scores "in local context." You didn't need to be a top test taker in California to be UC-eligible. You just needed to be a top test taker within your own school."

This is not true. Flanagan is referring to the University of California’s Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) program, which provides UC eligibility to top students from each high school. However, since the ELC began in 2001, it has only evaluated students on the basis of high school grades, not test scores. See [this UC website](#) describing the program. There is no other “local context” program implemented by the University of California system.

Second, the article claims that:

“Because students at underfunded schools have such limited access to college counseling, they often assume that if they want to go to the UC, they should keep an eagle eye on their GPA. What many don’t know is that, to be eligible, they must complete a series of 15 college prep classes called the A-G requirements. Good grades in other classes don’t count.”

This statement confuses UC eligibility – the minimum requirements needed to be admitted to UC’s least-selective campus – and UC admission. Good grades do not count for eligibility, but they *do* count for admission to every UC campus. If good students want to go to UC, they should absolutely try to earn high grades in non-A-G courses. See point 2 of [this UC website](#), which explicitly states that the University of California considers non-A-G course grades in admission.

Third, the article claims that:

“There was a loophole these students could use, and it involved test scores: The course-load requirement could be waived for those who did well enough on the SAT or the ACT.”

This is not true. Students must still fulfill the University of California’s referenced “minimum requirements”, which includes 15 A-G courses, in order to be eligible for the UC statewide guarantee. The UC somewhat obscures this fact on its website, so it’s an easy mistake to make. For example, the university’s [website on A-G requirements](#) states that “you may meet [the A-G requirement] by completing college courses or earning certain scores on SAT, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams”, but this actually only refers to the *SAT II* subject exams (as can be seen with each of the drop-down items below), and this rule is still in place even though UC no longer accepts SAT or ACT exams in admissions. Moreover, UC’s [website on the statewide guarantee](#) never explicitly states that the minimum requirements must still be met for students to be eligible. However, [the Index itself](#) only begins for students who have taken at least 30 semesters of A-G courses, matching the minimum requirements, and the UC committee tasked with setting the Index thresholds clearly states that the Index applies only to students who satisfy the minimum requirements [in their report](#) (top of Page 7). Any contact in UC admissions would confirm the same.

Finally, and most significantly, the article claims that

“This was a Hail Mary pass for many smart kids who, for whatever reason, didn’t do well in high school or did well but not in the A-G classes. In 2018, about 22,000 students “tested in” to the UC Almost half of those students were low-income, and more than a quarter were Black, Latino, or Native American. The UC has now taken this lifeline away.”

This claim badly misunderstands the nature of UC’s statewide guarantee. It is true that about 22,000 students were eligible for the statewide guarantee in 2018 but were not Eligible in the Local Context ([Task Force report](#), pg. 33). However, UC campuses admit thousands of students every year who are

neither “statewide guarantee” or “ELC” (15,000 in 2018: Table 10.1 of [this UC report](#), pg. 26); applicants DO NOT have to be one or the other in order to be eligible for UC admission. As a result, most of those 22,000 students would have been admitted to UC even if they had not gotten the statewide guarantee. Therefore, saying that they “tested in” is wrong; many would have been admitted anyway.

But it gets worse. The [same UC report](#) states that the “referral pool” – which refers to the students who were either statewide guarantee or ELC but *were rejected* from every UC campus to which they applied – had 12,500 students in 2018 (pg. 6). The way UC admissions works is that those students are “guaranteed” a slot at UC, so they were all offered admission to UC Merced, UC’s least-selective campus, to which none of them had chosen to apply. **Only 168 actually enrolled at Merced as a result** (pg. 6). In other words, the number of students who “tested in” to the UC in 2018 was actually *at most* 168, since some of those actually got in by their grades alone (through ELC), not the statewide guarantee. And they all went to UC Merced, the least-selective (and least-prestigious) UC campus. The true number is less than 1% of Flanagan’s reported number. I believe that demographic statistics of these 168 students are not reported.

In all, these factual inaccuracies severely limit the force of Flanagan’s presented argument.

Addendum: Some of the inaccuracies and misunderstandings in Flanagan’s article arise from confusion between three separate concepts: applicants who satisfy UC’s minimum requirements (sometimes referred to as “UC eligible” or “Entitled to Review”), applicants guaranteed admission to at least one UC campus (also confusingly referred to as “UC eligible” in some cases; entails satisfying either UC’s statewide guarantee or Eligibility in the Local Context), and applicants admitted to UC (who are independently selected by each UC campus on the basis of a set of factors). Interested readers should see [pages 10-19 of this report](#), in which Sarah Reber carefully characterizes each of these concepts:

Figure 1. University of California Admissions Eligibility Concepts

