UCSD policy limits community college students
Raising GPA requirement to 3.5 will exclude many students from program

BY PAT FLYNN
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED MARCH 18, 2011 AT 6:30 P.M., UPDATED MARCH 18, 2011 AT 7:16 P.M.

Transfer agreement applications to UCSD
Local community colleges for fall 2011

Cuyamaca: 61
Grossmont: 204
Imperial: 19
MiraCosta: 257
Palomar: 237
City: 105
Mesa: 363
Miramar: 128
Southwestern: 152

Explosion in applications at UCSD
2008: 408
2009: 1,946
2010: 3,427
2011: 8,715

Guarnatee transfer requirements
UC San Diego: 3.5 GPA
UC Santa Barbara: 3.2
*Other UC campuses: 3.0
*UCLA and Berkeley do not have TAG programs

With transfer applications soaring and budget cuts looming, the University of California San Diego is raising the threshold on a guaranteed admission program for the state’s community college students.

For years, community college students who took specific courses and obtained a 3.0 grade-point average could count on admission under the program called Transfer Admissions Guarantee, or TAG.

But faced with growing demand and limited capacity, UCSD officials in recent weeks have notified community college officials statewide that for guaranteed admission in 2012 and beyond TAG students will have to earn GPAs of 3.5 or better.

Mae Brown, assistant vice chancellor and director of admissions at UCSD, said that TAG applications have grown from 443 five years ago to 8,715 for fall admission this year.

“We saw the exponential growth in TAG applications — this is a guarantee — and the obvious issue is we don’t have the capacity,” Brown said. “Given the severe budget situation, and the university (statewide) taking a $500 million or more budget reduction, if we are going to guarantee, we should be guaranteeing admissions to the best prepared.”

UCSD’s program started in the early 1980s and involved only two-year schools in San Diego and Imperial counties. Later, UCSD entered agreements with 33 colleges around the state. And since 2009 it has offered the program to all 112 California community colleges.

Brown said applications spiked dramatically for 2011 largely due to a new computer-based process that makes it easier for TAG students to apply to multiple campuses. Still, she said, the trend was already overtaxing the campus’ capacity.

The university’s decision has prompted a sharp response from officials of Southwestern College, which serves a predominantly minority population in the South Bay.

“We are very concerned,” said Angelica Suarez, vice president for student affairs at the one-college district. “It’s about access for our students. This is going to narrow and reduce the number of students who can go to UCSD.”

Suarez and Jaime Salazar, Southwestern’s transfer center coordinator, said UCSD’s decision directly contradicts university policies calling for the removal of barriers for students from traditionally underrepresented groups.

“They’re always giving us lip service,” said Salazar. “They say they’re committed to diversity, but it’s all lip service. It’s all about being the Ivy League of the West, serving the elite.”

Brown, who has met recently on the issue with representatives of all six community college districts in San Diego and Imperial counties, dismissed the notion that the change runs counter to the university’s diversity goals. She said that when the TAG program was implemented in the early 1980s — available then only to local two-year colleges — it was meant to boost then-low transfers from community colleges.

“It had nothing to do with underrepresented minorities,” she said.

Brown noted that UCSD will continue to admit community college transfers through TAG and the non-
guaranteed transfer process.

“Because community colleges are so racially diverse, you automatically pick up more diversity whenever you admit those transfers,” she said.

Of the nine University of California undergraduate campuses, seven have TAG programs. Berkeley and UCLA do not offer guaranteed transfer admissions to community college students.

Nick Serrano, a Southwestern College student government officer, disagrees with Brown’s contention that the decision is neutral in its effect on minorities.

“The change from a 3.0 to a 3.5 is huge,” said Serrano. “To a lot of our students this is discriminating because minority students do tend to have lower GPAs.”

He added that many UC-eligible Southwestern students can’t really consider other campuses in the system because they can’t afford the cost of living away from home.

“It’s an access issue,” Serrano said. “It will limit a lot of our students, who can only go local, from going to UCSD.”

UCSD accepted 25 TAG students from Southwestern in 2008, 46 in 2009 and 66 in 2010. It has received 152 TAG applications for fall of this year.

Brown said that based on 2010 data, she estimates the 3.5 threshold would have reduced the applicant pool by about 50 percent.

Administrators at other local community colleges are not as distressed by UCSD’s decision as their counterparts at Southwestern.

“I agree that it’s a big jump (from 3.0 to 3.5,)” said Lynn Neault, vice chancellor of student services for the San Diego Community College District. “As the demand for higher education increases, they’ve got to manage budgets and manage enrollment just like we do.

“What we need to do is make clear to our students from the start that they need to get as high a GPA as they can.”

Neault estimated that the higher GPA would disqualify about 45 percent of her district’s TAG applicants.

Southwestern College officials and others have asked UCSD to modify its decision. They have suggested that students already in the program be grandfathered in at 3.0 for 2012 admission.

Other suggestions include keeping the threshold at 3.0 for San Diego and Imperial county students while raising it for others. Another is that the level be raised only to 3.2.

Brown said the decision has already been made by the faculty’s admissions committee. But the question of those in the pipeline, at least, is open to discussion.

“We’ve met with the community college vice presidents,” Brown said. “And we’ve talked about ways to accommodate students in that bind.”