

A Math Horror Show at UCSD

Remember when the University of California kicked off a trend by eliminating the SAT test as an admissions requirement five years ago? Now arrives the dispiriting result: Many freshmen at one of its top public universities can't do middle-school math.

The University of California, San Diego, is widely considered one of the nation's top public universities, ranking sixth in U.S. News & World Report. So a new analysis by its joint faculty-administration committee of its student preparation may reflect a broader decline in academic rigor and standards.

"Over the past five years, UC San Diego has experienced a steep decline in the academic preparation of its entering first-year students—particularly in mathematics, but also in writing and language skills," the report notes. "This trend poses serious challenges both to student success and to the university's instructional mission." That's an understatement. Do college students even know what these words mean?

One in eight of UC San Diego freshmen have math skills that "fall below middle-school level," a 30-fold increase since 2020. Yet the average high-school math GPA was an A- for students taking a middle-school remedial course. This suggests rampant grade inflation in high schools. Its effects were exacerbated by the UC Board of Regents move in May 2020 to stop requiring the SAT in the name of making admissions more equitable and improving "educational quality."

An earlier faculty senate report noted the SAT and ACT "add substantially to UC's ability to predict student success" beyond high school grades. The UC San Diego report corroborates worries that scrapping the SAT would erode admissions standards, noting "a mismatch between students' course level/grades and their actual levels of preparation."

The report also blames the university's increased admissions of students from "under-resourced high schools," which is a euphemism for schools with more minorities and low-income students. What the report doesn't say is that the university may have increased admissions from these schools to circumvent the state ban on racial preferences.

Declining student preparation appears widespread at the state's universities: About half of UC campus math chairs say that the "number of first-year students that are unable to start in college-level precalculus"—which used to be a standard course for California's top high school sophomores—doubled over the last five years. The other half of chairs said the number tripled.

In 2013 California started down the slippery slope of declining standards by dropping algebra as a requirement for eighth-graders. Now many of its top college students can't even add fractions. Politicians blame rising unemployment among recent college grads on artificial intelligence. Maybe the real problem is the not-so-soft bigotry of ever-lower expectations.