Calif. Medicine
July 1997

MEDICAL EDUCATION

Minorities at UC: Going, Going... Gone?

At UC's med schools, the decline in minority admissions has been so severe that now even Ward Connerly is calling for outreach programs. **BY SIGRID BATHEN**

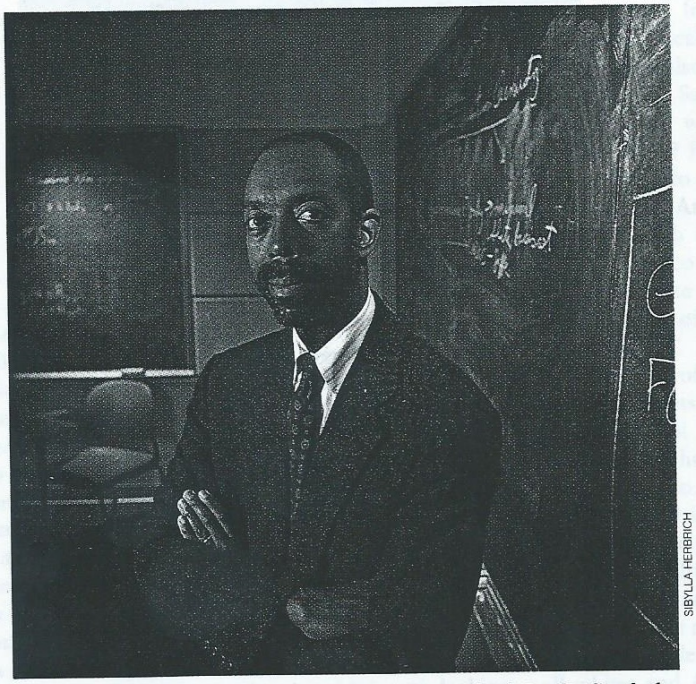
In his final year as an undergraduate at UC-Berkeley, Dustin Paz began applying to medical schools. The son of a Latino Lucky Stores warehouseman and the first in his family ever to graduate from college, Paz's preference was to attend either UC-San Francisco or UC-San Diego. He applied to UC-Davis, as well.

He interviewed at all three. But the response he got was less than effusive. Neither his 3.78 GPA, nor the summer that he spent at the Yale University Medical School as part of a student exchange program, nor the college chemistry tutoring that he did to help pay his tuition seemed to make much of an impression. Don't call us, we *may* call you," was, in essence, the message he got from his interviewers. Which was considerably less than what he either hoped for or expected. And, by the end of May, not a single UC had accepted him.

Yet, at the very same time that he was getting the cold shoulder from the UCs, Paz was being aggressively courted by some of the nation's most prestigious, out-of-state institutions— places like Johns Hopkins and Harvard, which sweetened their offers to him with very substantial scholarships.

To be sure, Dustin Paz is going to medical school this fall. And, of course, you can't go far wrong by going to Harvard— which is the school he finally decided on. But his case nevertheless raises a troubling specter. It's the chance that in their zeal to wipe affirmative action out of the admissions process, Ward Connerly and his fellow UC Regents have managed to pull the welcome mat out from under even the state's most qualified minority students.

Of course, the Regents would vigorously deny that this was their intent when, in 1995, they voted to eliminate all racial and ethnic preferences. And too they would insist now, as they always have, that affirmative action is itself a perverse form of unfairness.



SIBYLLA HERBRICH

As UCSF's associate dean of admissions, Dr. Michael Drake firmly believes in the value of affirmative action. But then he's also obliged to honor the ban that the UC Regents have ordered.

But at this point even Connerly, the black Republican Regent whose crusade against affirmative action has made him something of a national figure, sounded a note of discomfort this spring when it was revealed that the number of under-represented minorities admitted to UC's law and medical schools had plummeted. "I think we have to do some modification of 209 [the state initiative approved of last November that eliminates all state and local government affirmative action programs] so if someone is engaged in targeted outreach they won't be sued," Connerly ventured in May at a forum sponsored by *Time* magazine.

About a month before, two state Senate committees— Business and Professions and Health and Human Services— convened a one-day joint hearing to look specifically at minority admissions at UC's med schools. One of the witnesses called to testify then was education attorney Joseph Jaramillo, who represented the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF)— an organization that had filed a complaint with the U.S. Education Department's Office of Civil Rights challenging the Regents' anti-affirmative action posture. "We have heard from UC faculty who report that they feel pressured to ensure that the number of minority and women admits drops significantly this year in order to avoid scrutiny from the UC Regents," he told the Senators.

In addition, a second-year, UCSF resident named Adriana Valdovinos-Campa alleged through written testimony that officials at the medical school she attended, UC-Davis, were guilty of perpetuating a pattern of discrimination. "My recollections of my first year at Davis are painful," she wrote, and recited details of several incidents where

minority students were forced to go on academic probation after serious family crises prevented them from taking their tests on time. Conversely, three white, male students— one dyslexic, one schizophrenic, and another with substance abuse problems— were given support and not forced to go on probation.

But perhaps the most dramatic testimony of all that day came from Dustin Paz, who was invited to speak after his father made a well-timed phone call to Sen. Richard Polanco, the Los Angeles Democrat who, as Chairman of the Business and Professions committee, presided over this hearing.

"The Regents say they want to ensure the continued diversity of their admissions," Paz declared without the benefit of notes. "I question that. Harvard and Johns Hopkins have accepted me because they want qualified minorities, and they realize the importance of graduating qualified doctors. I was a die-hard UC fan. I've met a lot of students at Harvard and Johns Hopkins who are from California. They spoke of the political situation in California, and said they wanted to get away, which I can understand."

It was just three decades ago that 93 percent of all medical students in this country were men and 97 percent non-Hispanic whites. What's more, virtually all of the blacks who did become doctors back then had graduated from a pair of exclusively black medical institutions. And, even as recently as 1971, the nation's medical schools only managed to graduate 19 Mexican-Americans, 14 mainland Puerto Ricans, and 2 Native Americans.

In fact, it was only in the 1980s that minority admissions really started to pick up thanks in no small way to both affirmative action and the so-called "pipeline" programs that encouraged minority students in grades K through 12 to take math and science courses.

If the recent backlash against affirmative action demonstrates anything, though, it's how fragile these gains are.

Last year, the number of under-represented minorities admitted to the nation's medical schools declined by 5 percent, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. But no state came even close to matching the 20 and 16 percent declines that Cal-

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ifornia's public and private medical schools respectively recorded— a testament, no doubt, to how intense the backlash has been here. "We've been carefully monitoring this for the last 25 years," says Dr. Michael Drake, an ophthalmologist who serves as associate dean of admissions at UCSF. "There is nothing that approximates this."

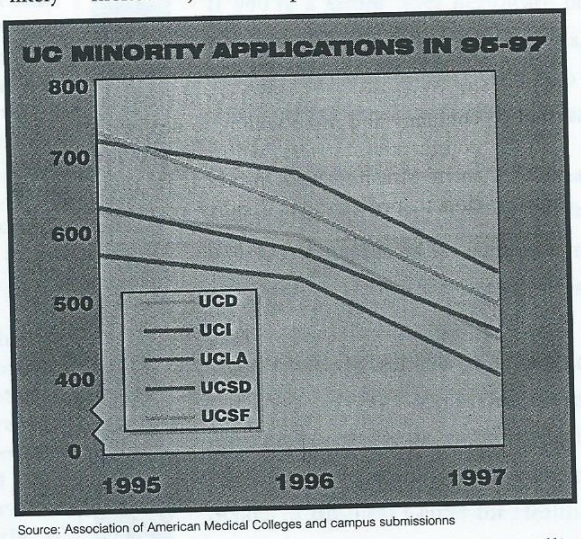
Drake's position here is, to say the least, a difficult one. On the one hand, he articulates the benefits of diversity with both vigor and conviction. In fact, he is one of the authors of a landmark study, published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in May of 1996, which showed that black and Latino communities are four times more likely than other communities to suffer from a physician shortage, regardless of income. After surveying 718 primary care physicians from 51 California communities, Drake and his fellow researchers also concluded that minority medical school graduates are almost four times as likely as other students to practice in underserved, low-income areas.

But then, of course, like all UC employees, Drake is obliged to honor the ban on affirmative action that the Regents have called for.

Are some of this state's most qualified minority students now being turned away as a result of this policy change? Most definitely, Drake responds. But the phenomenon, which he alludes to as "preemptive capitulation"— the tendency among application reviewers to avoid even the hint of a challenge to the current policy— is more complicated than is generally appreciated, particularly at an institution as competitive as UCSF. Here, where 5,500 now apply each year, 125 offers are made to those who, as Drake puts it, "walk on water." These are the students who weigh in with grade point averages in the range of 3.8 or above and who score top marks in over a dozen categories. These categories include quality of research, quality of undergraduate school curriculum, standardized test scores, community participation, the impression that's made during interviews, and the breathlessness of whatever letters of recommendation are presented. Phrases like: "I mean this to be the strongest recommendation letter I've ever written" can be readily gleaned from these documents.

This leaves another 75 to 80 slots to be filled with the less-than-perfect— students, says Drake, who, while trying to walk on water, "manage to get their ankles wet." Here's where, for example, the fact that a student is the first in his family ever to go to college may offset a slightly lower MCAT score. And, before the affirmative action ban went into effect, the fact that an applicant was black could offset a slightly lower grade point average.

How slight? UCSF's numbers are rather interesting in this regard. They show that in 1995, before the ban kicked in, the non-poor minority students who were accepted drew as a group a grade point average only 0.08 less than the class average. At the same time, the GPA of those minorities who came from financially disadvantaged backgrounds was somewhere in the range of 0.3 to 0.4 less. Not a very large difference at all. But one, says Drake, that allowed the school to enjoy the benefits of a diverse student body while giving under-served communities the benefit of UCSF-trained doctors.



Source: Association of American Medical Colleges and campus submissionns

Now, however, all bets are off. And the most troubling thing about it, Drake suggests, is that in addition to locking deserving students out, the current ban on affirmative action may well be setting in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy that will, over time, discourage even the most gifted minority students from applying— students who, perhaps, have even stronger records than Dustin Paz.

When in 1996 the first statistics appeared showing a sharp decline in minority entrants at the UCs, Regent Roy Brophy, a conservative construction industry executive from Sacramento who voted *against* the affirmative action ban, expressed his distress. He called the figures "very, very unfortunate."

Now, the latest indicators suggest that another precipitous drop in minority admissions is in the offing. At UC-Davis, for example, which continues to be under investigation by the U.S. Dept. of Education's Office of Civil Rights after minority students filed allegations of discriminatory admissions and retention practices, minority medical school applications dropped from a high of 640 in 1994 to 445 in 1997, according to college submission records.

Nationally, the decline in minority med school students also appears to be continuing. "The early enrollment numbers lead us to project that for the country as a whole we will have as steep a slide in 1997 as we did in '96," says Dr. Herbert Nickens, vice-president for community and minority programs for the Association of American Medical Colleges, who also testified at the hearing in Sacramento.

So, what exactly is the solution? For their part, Senators Polanco and Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles), who chairs Health and Human Services, have co-authored a resolution calling on state authorities to recommend a plan of action. At the same time, the UC system has proposed spending tens of millions of dollars to mentor students in some of the state's poorest school districts. But that, of course, won't have much of an impact in the short run.

"The word is getting out," Regent Brophy warned last year, "that the University of California is not interested in diversity. And the result is going to show up in the numbers. In three to five years," he added, "[UC] is going to be all whites and Asian-Americans."

Which may have seemed a little far-fetched at the time he said it. But no longer. ■

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