

Improving High School Preparation: Beginning the Path to On-time Degree Completion

Executive Summary

The University of New Mexico is committed to student success and on-time degree completion. To this end we are discussing the modification of our existing admissions process to gradually increase the required GPA from the current 2.25 to a 2.5 and increase the curriculum requirements from 13 units to 16 units. **This approach continues to de-emphasize test scores.**

The new process would provide educational opportunities to all that apply to UNM and ensure that all applicants have a greater chance for academic success. **No New Mexico beginning freshman will be denied admission to UNM.** Students would be admitted using a two-tier approach: (1) Those who meet the requirements will be admitted to the ABQ Campus. (2) Students who need more preparation will receive admission to UNM through branch campuses, CNM, or other state community colleges to begin. Formula admission, known as Plan B, will be restructured to incorporate high school grade point average in lieu of class rank. A weighted grade point calculation and phased approach will give all students an opportunity to be prepared for admission.

The University is considering this modification to admission requirements in a very cautious and measured manner. It has evolved over a two year period and has taken into account the statistical and qualitative impact on UNM and the communities we serve. A compendium of discussion participants and actions from stakeholders regarding the proposal include:

- Current and prospective students
 - ASUNM, prospective student surveys, ethnic centers
- Faculty and staff
 - Faculty Senate (approved motion in support 4/28/2009)
 - Admissions and Registration Faculty Senate Committee
 - Title V Faculty Advisory Committee
 - Special Emphasis Committee for Accreditation
 - Diversity Council
- Athletics
- School district superintendents, principals, and guidance counselors
 - APS, PED, NMCSA, visits to Pueblo and smaller rural schools
 - Letters to 160 school principals

- Tribal leadership
 - All Indian Pueblo Council (approved proposal Sept. 25, 2008)
 - Select rural schools and officials
- Community organizations
 - Hispanic Round Table Education Committee and full Round Table
 - Albuquerque Partnership

Student Benefits

Analyzing the persistence data of 12 cohorts of new students at UNM dating back to 1995 revealed a 6% increase in retention for those admitted with a 2.5 high school GPA compared to a 2.25 GPA. This is a significant gain for this interval. Table 1 illustrates the different retention rates based on high school GPA.

Table 1.

RETENTION BY HIGH SCHOOL GPA		
HS GPA Ranges	3rd Semester Retention	Number of Students
Missing	.68	854
<2.50	.56	1,135
>=2.50,<2.75	.62	2,878
>=2.75,<3.00	.65	3,996
>=3.00,<3.25	.70	5,161
>=3.25,<3.50	.75	4,941
>=3.50,<3.75	.80	4,852
>=3.75,<3.95	.85	3,259
>=3.95	.90	3,349
Total	.74	30,425

Source: OIR Freshman Cohort Tracking 1996-2006

The high school GPA increase is the preferred choice for improving preparation as opposed to utilizing a minimum score on a standardized college entrance exam such as ACT or SAT. Not only is the high school GPA considered more predictive of college success but the de-emphasis of test scores in favor of curriculum and GPA assists the University in maintaining a strong commitment to access and diversity since this approach has less of an impact on under-represented populations.¹

¹ Saul Geiser and Maria Veronica Santelices, "Validity Of High-School Grades In Predicting Student Success Beyond The Freshman Year: High-School Record vs. Standardized Tests as Indicators of Four-Year College Outcomes" (June 13, 2007). *Center for Studies in Higher Education*. Paper CSHE_9_07. http://repositories.cdlib.org/cshe/CSHE_9_07

A slightly higher high school GPA of a 2.5 is also a better indicator of likelihood to attain the Legislative Lottery Scholarship (LLS). Students below a 2.5 high school GPA have a 34% chance of obtaining the LLS compared to an overall attainment level of over 70%.² The 2.5 GPA also mirrors the requirement for the Bridge to Success Scholarship at UNM. Most importantly, utilizing an emphasis on high school performance maintains access to UNM for all who aspire to attend. Utilizing a minimum score on the most common test taken by New Mexico high school students, the ACT, would limit admission under almost any scenario.

This commentary from the most recent intensive study regarding college graduation rates emphasizes the importance of good grades in high school over any other criterion:

High school grades are key: High school grades are the single best gauge of how well a student will do in college, no matter how "easy" or "tough" the high school's grading system is. "High school grades measure a student's ability to 'get it done' in a more powerful way than do SAT scores. . . . They reveal qualities of motivation and perseverance—as well as the presence of good study habits and time management skills—that tell us a great deal about the chances that a student will complete a college program," William Bowen from his book regarding graduation rates of 200,000 freshmen who started at public four-year colleges in 1999.³

The New Mexico legislature embraced a mechanism to assist students in their preparation for college by passing Senate Bill 943 in the 2007 session. This legislation allowed students in New Mexico public schools to enroll in a dual credit high school/college course at virtually no cost to them. UNM wishes to encourage students to take advantage of this opportunity by rewarding them for registering and performing well in these and other advanced standing programs including Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) courses, and Honors courses. The ideal method to do this is offer a weighted GPA based on a scale created and applied by UNM Admissions as opposed to accepting a weighted GPA as determined by the high school. This method rewards students in scholarship competitions and other pursuits but does not carry the inequity of different weighting systems as determined by individual high schools.

² Based on an average of four beginning freshman cohorts 2003-2006 from OIR Freshman Cohort Tracking

³ William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, "Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities" (September 28, 2009). *Princeton University Press*, p.123-124.

The cumulative weighted grade point average would include additional weight for Dual Credit, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) courses, as well as Honors courses.

Grade	Dual Enrollment/		
	AP / IB/ AICE	Honors Courses	Other
A	5	4.5	4
B	4	3.5	3
C	3	2.5	2
D	1	1	1
F	0	0	0

For example, a high school student enrolling in a Dual Credit or Advanced Placement class and earning an A would receive 5 points vs. the traditional 4 in the GPA calculation. This approach and methodology has been adopted and proven to be beneficial to students and institutions in other states.

Curriculum Does Count

Another major national longitudinal study known as *THE TOOLBOX REVISITED* from a well-respected Department of Education researcher indicated students need a minimum of 15 college preparatory units to graduate from college on time. Completing 16 units increase graduation rates by 6% over 13 units and the most successful students had nearly 20 college preparatory units.⁴ According to Adelman:

The academic intensity of the student's high school curriculum still counts more than anything else in precollegiate history in providing momentum toward completing a bachelor's degree. (p. xviii)

The results indicate that increased high school curriculum intensity has a profound positive impact on Latino students in degree completion. This is a huge benefit for UNM's large and increasing Hispanic student population.

Recent legislation passed in New Mexico has increased the requirements for graduation from high school. Feedback from the Public Education Department indicates that an increase in the number of college preparatory units required by UNM complements this change in state law.

⁴ Clifford Adelman, *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2006.

Table 2 illustrates how the current curricular requirements relate to the legislation and the proposal to increase the number of units for admission.

Table 2.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PROPOSED PRE-COLLEGE CURRICULUM		
UNM ADMISSIONS (current)	NMPED Per SB 561 (2007) (Class of 2013)	PROPOSED REQUIREMENTS (if higher level math is available in year 3)
4 English, (one is Composition)	4 English	4 English, w/composition in Yr 4
3 Math (Alg I, Geometry, Alg II, Trig, Calc, or higher math)	4 Math (through at least Alg II)	4 Math (Alg I, Geometry, Alg II, and highly recommend capstone or higher math such as Trig, Calc, etc. in Yr 4)
2 Science (one with lab)	3 Science (two labs)	3 Science (two labs)
2 Social Science (one U.S. History)	3.5 Social Science (NM Hist, US Hist & Geog, World Hist & Geog, Gov, Econ)	3 Social Science
2 Foreign Language	2 Foreign Lang., 1 Phys. Ed., 1 Comm. Or Bus. Ed. , 5.5 Electives	2 Foreign Language
13 units		16 units

Competitive Positioning

The admission criteria for many peer groups have been reviewed in detail. The comparisons we highlight in Table 3 include the regional proximate universities who receive common test scores and applications from prospective students. This is important because of the obvious ramifications of remaining competitive in enrolling qualified students. These institutions have alternative admission criteria in addition to those listed such as the formula/index admission option we are proposing that involves a higher test score requirement paired with a lower GPA or class rank.

The New Mexico State example requires only 10 pre-college units, but the performance criteria of a minimum GPA of 2.25 AND a 19 ACT is actually higher than UNM’s current requirement. The test score minimum is not required if the student meets the 2.5 GPA.

Table 3.

REGIONAL INSTITUTION COMPARISON OF ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS		
Institution	Performance Requirements	Pre-college Units
Arizona State University	3.0 GPA (2.5-2.99 May be Considered)	16
Colorado State University	3.25 GPA (For Priority)	18
New Mexico State University	2.25 GPA AND 19 ACT (If Test Score Not Met then Student Must have a 2.5 GPA)	10
Texas Tech University	Top 10% of H.S. Class or Index Top 25% and a 25 ACT; Top 50% and a 28 ACT	18
University of Oklahoma	3.0 GPA and Top 25%	15
University of Arizona	Rank in Top 25%	16
University of Colorado	3.5 GPA or Top 10%	17
University of Texas El Paso	Top 50% of Class or 20 ACT	Not Considered
University of Texas Austin	Top 10% or Competitive	20
University of New Mexico	2.25 GPA	13

Most institutions that are aspiring to improve persistence and completion rates take an abrupt approach to escalating their admission requirements. The University of New Mexico has admirably resisted implementing a minimum test score requirement to be admitted. The negative aspect of not increasing standards is reflected by many students who earn high test scores and grade point averages, and more often their parents, when they indicate UNM's low entrance criteria give the perception of lackluster academic quality. Implementing the proposed changes allow for a positioning statement that we are intent on improving quality while retaining access.

Impact on Students

The most critical question with this or any proposal modifying admission requirements is “what is the impact on students?” To answer this question we analyzed the average data of three recent classes and also reviewed the 2008 class separately due to its large size and growth in diversity.

When averaging three classes together, the highest number of students impacted is 44 in the White and Hispanic categories. The group impacted by the highest percentage is African American at 8.6%. The least proportionate impacted is the “Other” category that includes students who did not respond to the ethnicity question.

Table 4 contains the details of the impact of increasing the GPA requirement from a 2.25 to a 2.5. The analysis involves an average of three cohorts of students to eliminate the influence of anomalies that could take place in any given year.

Table 4.

MINIMUM 2.5 GPA IMPACT ON THE FRESHMAN CLASS (3 Cohort Average)			
Ethnicity	Head-count	% Decrease	Head-count Decrease
White	1360	3.25%	44
Black	93	8.60%	8
Hispanic	1136	3.89%	44
American Indian	160	5.25%	8
Asian	126	3.79%	5
Other	125	2.45%	3
Total	3000	3.73%	113

Source: OIR Freshman Cohort Tracking

The freshman class of 2008 was also analyzed separately due to the large growth and diversity. The increase would have had a slightly larger impact on this class overall and a larger aggregate influence on Hispanic students. The highest proportionate impact was again African American students but it was lower than the three year average at 6.3% of those who enrolled. Table 5 represents the impact on the 2008 cohort.

Table 5.

MINIMUM 2.5 GPA IMPACT ON THE FRESHMAN CLASS (3,226 in Fall 2008)			
Ethnicity	Headcount	% Decrease	Headcount Decrease
White	1376	2.9%	40
Black	128	6.3%	8
Hispanic	1272	5.1%	65
American Indian	186	4.3%	8
Asian	136	5.9%	8
Other	128	4.7%	6
Total	3226	4.2%	135

Source: OIR Freshman Cohort Tracking

All students applying to UNM are considered first for what is known as Plan A or Criterion I Admission. This process only evaluates the high school GPA and college preparatory units completed. Test scores are not considered in the admission decision at this point. If a student does not meet the GPA and unit requirement then they are evaluated on Plan B or Criterion II also known as “formula” admissions. Under the current standards, the formula is based on ACT or SAT test score and class rank. In the proposed formula admissions, we will replace class rank

with high school GPA because increasingly, schools do not rank students and this omission prevents them from having a chance at being admitted under Plan B. Nearly every applicant has a high school GPA in their credentials so they could be considered under the new proposal. This index approach works by allowing a student with a high GPA to be admitted even if they have a low test score and vice versa. Under the proposed formula model, 35 of the 135 students who would not have been admitted if the GPA requirement were 2.5 would have been admitted under Plan B.

The third option considered for admission if a student does not qualify under Plan A or Plan B is a Special Admission category known as Plan C or Criterion III. This is a holistic review of the student's credentials including background and challenges that have been encountered and overcome on the path to college. There is substantial flexibility in this category and often students who are just short of the admission criteria are admitted to UNM through this process.

These admissions categories are presented here in a graphic with the potential year one adjustments added in markup format.

1. Minimum GPA of a ~~2.25~~ 2.3 average on a 4.500 weighted scale for all high school courses plus completion of the following ~~13~~ 14 specific college preparatory units with ~~at least a 2.25 GPA average~~ appropriate GPA (two semesters equal one unit).

English - 4 units, one of which must be 11th or 12th grade composition

Math - 3 units including Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, Trigonometry, Calculus, or higher mathematics

Social Science - ~~2~~ 3 units, one of which must be U.S. History

Natural Science - 2 units, one of which must be a lab science in Biology, Chemistry, or Physics

Foreign Language - 2 units, both units must be the same language or evidence of proficiency in a second language

2. ~~Minimum of a 2.25 average in all high school courses plus a~~ A formula based on ACT or SAT scores and ~~class rank~~ weighted grade point average:

Minimum ACT Composite / ~~Class-Rank~~ GPA

Minimum Combined Critical Reading and Mathematics SAT / ~~Class-Rank~~ GPA

18 / 2.7

870 / 2.7

19 / 2.6

910 / 2.6

20 / 2.5

950 / 2.5

21 / 2.4

990 / 2.4

22 / 2.3

1030 / 2.3

23 / 2.2

1070 / 2.2

24 / 2.1

1110 / 2.1

25 / 2.0

1150 / 2.0

29 or higher / No minimum

1300 or higher / No minimum

3. Special Admissions - a limited number of students who do not qualify for admission under criteria 1 or 2 may request "special consideration" through an appeal process. A combination of quantitative and subjective factors is used in making these admissions decisions.

The Gateway Program is also an expanding and improving admissions pathway for students who may not be prepared to succeed at UNM. If a student does not qualify for one of the entrance criteria, they will not be refused but admitted into the Gateway Program. We have formal partnerships in place with UNM branches, CNM, San Juan College, Santa Fe Community College, and New Mexico Junior College. Participants are considered UNM students and are eligible to live in UNM campus housing and participate in activities, events, and organizations. Enhanced advising and communication with the students are also benefits. The program is in its second year and has grown from 18 students to nearly 60. We hope to include 200 participants in the near future and are working continuously to resolve issues regarding clean transfer of credit, stronger integration into the UNM campus, and increasing transfer rates.

Gradual Implementation

Much of the discussion with the community has revolved around concerns about students not being ready for the changes when they go into effect. Two critical components of the plan related to these concerns are the communication plan to introduce students, families, and the community to the changes, and a gradual implementation schedule that allows the changes to be activated slowly and incrementally over a three year period. The schedule would include increasing the GPA from a 2.25 to a 2.3 the first year and increasing the curricular requirements by one unit from 13 to 14; the next year to a 2.4 GPA and 15 units; and the final phase a year later would be a 2.5 GPA and 16 units as indicated in the chart. The earliest semester this proposal could be activated would be fall 2011.

Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013
2.3 GPA Require 14 college preparatory units (add 1 social science)	2.4 GPA Require 15 college preparatory units (add 1 laboratory science)	2.5 GPA Require 16 college preparatory units (consider the 4 th math if schools can deliver or require an additional unit from another area)

Continuous Feedback Opportunities

Finally, feedback and suggestions have strengthened this proposal over the last two years of discussion. We always encourage input through the tellus@unm.edu email account or visiting with our staff personally.