State auditor blasts UC for admitting unqualified students based on wealthy connections

Newstex Blogs

CalMatters

September 22, 2020 Tuesday 10:35 PM EST

Length: 1635 words

Byline: Mikhail Zinshteyn

Body

Sep 22, 2020(CalMatters: https://calmatters.org Delivered by Newstex) In summary The state auditor found a lot of holes in the way the University of California conducts its admissions process, from inappropriate donor influence to questionable student athlete decisions. The state audit also disagrees with the UC's internal audit. A stinging report issued by California's state auditor today slams[1] the University of California for a culture of privileging wealth and access over merit in its admissions process, galvanizing concern that talented low-income students and students of color are displaced by less qualified but better connected students.The audit report found that four UC campuses 'unfairly admitted 64 applicants based on their personal or family connections to donors and university staff' between 2013-14 through 2018-19. Most of the applicants were white and at least half came from families with incomes of $150,000 or more.Of those, campus employees at UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara 'falsely designated' 22 applicants as student-athletes 'because of donations from or as favors to well-connected families.' That number could be a significant undercount and actually exceed 400 students, according to the audit.

In addition, UC Berkeley admitted 42 unqualified students beyond athletics, even though some of them had 'the lowest possible scores on their applications.' Multiple managers were involved in these inappropriate admissions decisions. These actions meant that more privileged students 'took the places' of more qualified applicants.The audit began in January, having been requested[2] in May 2019 by Assemblymember Tasha Horvath, an Encitas Democrat. Six staff members from the state auditor's office worked on the report.The report documented an admissions system ripe for abuse. Often, sports coaches fundraise as part of their contracts and use that money to cover a wide variety of expenses for their teams. The reliance on donations to fund their programs can result in coaches falsely marking 'applicants as qualified athletes' to curry favor with existing or potential donors, the audit report said.According to the report, campus employees at UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara 'falsely designated' 22 applicants as student-athletes 'because of donations from or as favors to well-connected families.'The audit also revealed an admissions process in which a campus's fundraising team is in regular contact with the admissions teams about particular students with low chances of admissions but are tied to donors. 'And then lo and behold the student is admitted as an athlete, never shows up on the roster, never participates in the sport,' said California State Auditor Elaine M. Howle in an interview with CalMatters.The findings echo the Varsity Blues scandal that rocked higher education last year[3] and ensnared UC Berkeley, UCLA and many other elite institutions that were involved in a pay to play scheme that admitted under qualified but well-connected students. Keep tabs on the latest California policy and politics news   But though the UC conducted its own audits of its applications process, 'none of the campuses have fully addressed the gaps in their athletics admissions processes,' the state audit said.New UC President Michael V. Drake responded to the state audit's

findings last month, writing that the system's internal audits recommendations are similar to what the state auditor found. The state auditor disagreed.The UC audit 'did not address significant aspects of the admissions process,' the state audit team wrote in a public response[4]. The audit team also said its recommendations are stronger and 'address serious deficiencies that it did not identify.'One shortcoming in the UC's self-scrutiny was that it did not detect how staff outside of admissions, including fundraising staff 'inappropriately influenced admissions decisions at UC Berkeley.' Beyond overt cases of admitting unqualified students, the state audit warned that the entire UC admissions process needs an overhaul because of inconsistent standards or practices that could result in applicants being judged for the wrong reasons.Howle told CalMatters that admissions readers, who help to determine whether a student is admitted, have wildly disparate scores for applicants. For a student, 'it's the luck of the draw' whether they get a lenient or more exacting grader, Howle told CalMatters.Another problem is that some campuses place personal data on applications that can lead to bias. At three campuses — UC Berkeley, UCLA and UC San Diego — application readers can see the students' names and native languages. Berkeley and UCSD let readers see an applicant's gender; Berkeley and UCLA allow readers to see where applicants were born. Readers could then wrongly make inferences about a student's race or ethnicity, the audit warned. The audit finds the practice strange because UC guidelines for how students are admitted do not include these details in the 14 factors for admission.But wealth and privilege play a particular role at Berkeley.Of the 42 students the audit says were inappropriately admitted to Berkeley, 17 were referred to the admissions office by university fundraising staff. In one case, the fundraising side sent a student's name to the admissions team so that the student could be interviewed in person. After the student applied to Berkeley, the admissions director rated the applicant as 'strongly recommend' even though a second application reader marked the applicant as 'do not recommend' — the lowest rating.'I am disappointed to see a world-acclaimed public institution, like the University of California, engaged in unfair admissions practices, denying spots to deserving students who lacked connections and money.' assemblymember phil ting But it's not just donors wielding immense power. Eleven of the 42 students flagged as inappropriate admissions by the audit were tied to university or campus staff. After the child of a 'director-level UC Berkeley staff member' was given an application rating of 'do not recommend' from both application readers, UC Berkeley admitted the student anyway without justification. Finally, 14 of the 42 students were admitted after landing on the admissions waitlist and had 'connections to donors, staff, and influential individuals.' The audit said these students' applications were not competitive otherwise.In one case, such a student was admitted after a member of the body that oversees the whole UC system — The UC Board of Regents — advocated for them through a letter to the campus. The action appears to contravene system policy, which says regents can only recommend applicants during the normal application process. In this case, a regent sent UC Berkeley Chancellor Carol T. Christ a letter after the applicant appeared on a waitlist. Then 'the chancellor's staff sent the letter to UC Berkeley's development office, which in turn forwarded the letter to the admissions office,' the audit said.In a statement released Tuesday, UC's president Drake said he has 'zero tolerance in matters of compromised integrity' and that 'individuals involved in improper activities will be disciplined appropriately.' Drake said the system will conduct a review of the audit findings, connect with campuses and 'map out the necessary corrective actions.' He vowed public transparency.The audit is sure to be fodder for legislators and groups critical of the role wealth and connections play in admissions to public higher education.'I am disappointed to see a world-acclaimed public institution, like the University of California, engaged in unfair admissions practices, denying spots to deserving students who lacked connections and money,' said in a statement Asm. Phil Ting, a Democrat from San Francisco who chairs the powerful budget committee in the Assembly and is a key player in allotting state funds to higher education in California.Already the campaign to reinstate affirmative action in California through Proposition 16[5], on the ballot this November, has seized on the report. 'This audit proves what we already know: There has always been preferential treatment for the wealthy and well-connected,' said Michele Siqueiros, a Yes on Prop 16 Ballot Measure Committee member, in a statement. 'Prop 16 levels the playing field for everyone else.'The state audit recommends that by March of next year the UC develop a methodology for picking between applicants with similar admissions scores and why an applicant with low ratings is ultimately picked instead of a higher-rated applicant. The audit also recommends that the UC conduct a random sample of students admitted under special rules for athletes and students with other talents but lower grades. This should be done annually starting in June of next year to verify that specially admitted students got in based on existing UC admissions guidelines. As part of its review, the state auditing team reviewed campus emails. They also evaluated whether students admitted as athletes were elite, their high school sports prowess and if they had ties to donors, among other methods. Support in-depth reporting that matters As a nonprofit newsroom, we rely on the generosity of Californians like you to cover the issues that matter. If you value

our reporting, support our journalism with a donation. [1]: http://auditor.ca.gov/pdfs/reports/2019-113.pdf [2]: https://calmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2019-113-Audit-Request-Letter.pdf [3]: https://calmatters.org/education/2019/03/california-college-admissions-scandal-uc-legislature-sat-athletes/ [4]: http://auditor.ca.gov/reports/2019-113/response.html [5]: https://calmatters.org/education/2020/09/affirmative-action-uc-admissions/

Load-Date: September 22, 2020

End of Document