

## RESEARCH REPORT

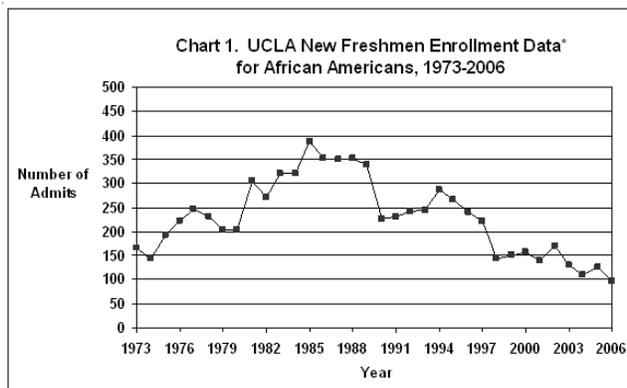
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# “MERIT” MATTERS: RACE, MYTH & UCLA ADMISSIONS 2006 CAPAA FINDINGS

This fall, UCLA will welcome its largest freshman class in campus history, with 4,852 students expected to enroll.<sup>1</sup> However, only 2 percent (96 students)<sup>2</sup> of this incoming class will be African American – the smallest enrollment of African Americans at UCLA since *at least* 1973<sup>3</sup> (see Chart 1). The stark contrast between the growth in overall enrollment and the dwindling presence of African Americans on campus again points to a trend of *resegregation* at the University of California (UC) documented in earlier Bunche Research Reports (2004, 2005, 2006).

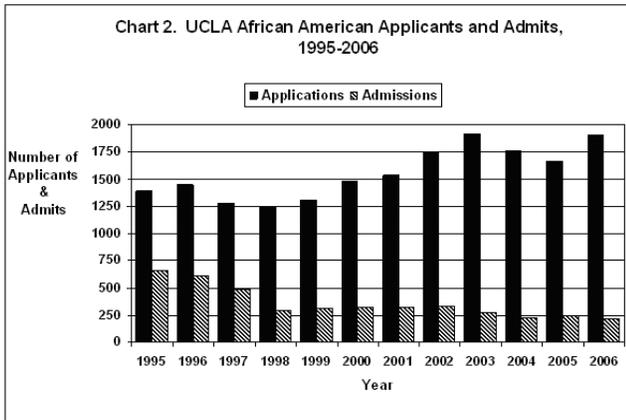
Resegregation began ten years ago with the implementation of Proposition 209, California legislation that bans the consideration of race and gender in admissions at state institutions. The negative impact of Proposition 209 on the admission of underrepresented students<sup>4</sup> at UC has been well documented (Allen, W., 2005; Bunche Research Report, 2005; Martin, I., Karabel, J. & Jaquez, S., 2003). UCLA’s dismal track record in African American enrollment since the implementation of Proposition 209, it should be noted, coincides with a channeling of underrepresented students from the most elite UC campuses to the least selective ones.



Indeed, the admission of African American undergraduates to UCLA has plummeted 65 percent over the last decade (see Chart 2) – the sharpest decline within the entire UC system (UCOP, 2006a).<sup>5</sup> This decline is especially troubling because UCLA consistently receives more African American applications than any other campus in the system (UCOP, 2004). Additionally, UCLA falls well below other highly-ranked research institutions in its admission of African American applicants (see Table 1). In fact, in 2005, UCLA ranked a lowly 29<sup>th</sup> among the nation’s top-30 research institutions in terms of African American admissions (“The Progress of Black Student Enrollments,” 2005).

\* Data from 1971-1995 does not differentiate California residents from non-residents.

Sources: (1) Ethnic Survey (UCLA) Subject Files, Reference Collection, UCLA University Archives, 1971-1995. (2) UCLA New Entering from High School – Ethnicity Statistics, 1996-2005. (3) University of California Office of the President (UCOP), University of California, Distribution of Statement of Intent to Register (SIRs) for Admitted Freshman, Fall 1997 through 2006.



Sources: (1) University of California Office of the President (UCOP), University of California, Application, Admissions, and Enrollment of California Resident Freshmen for Fall 1995 through 2004. (2) UCOP, Percent Change in On-time Applications - California Freshmen - Fall 2004, 2005, and 2006 (By Ethnicity and Campus). (3) UCOP, Distribution of New California Freshman Admit Offers Fall 1997 through 2006.

**Table 1. Percentage of Freshman at the Highest-Ranked\* Universities Who Are African American, Fall 2005**

Institution	African American Freshmen
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill	11.1%
University of Virginia	10.2
Stanford University	9.5
Duke University	9.5
Princeton University	9.4
Harvard University	9.3
University of Southern California	4.8
University of Chicago	4.4
University of Notre Dame	3.3
University of California, Berkeley	3.1
<b>University of California, Los Angeles</b>	<b>2.7</b>
California Institute of Technology	0.4

\* High-ranking universities according to *U.S. News & World Report*.

Note: From a list of 30 institutions, this table includes only the *top 6* with the most African American freshmen and the *bottom 6* with the least African American freshmen.

Source: The progress of black student enrollments at the nation's highest-ranked colleges and universities. (2005). *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, (49), 6-15.

The current crisis of black enrollment at UCLA is also particularly disturbing because, in many ways, UCLA should be the most poised among the UC campuses to serve African American students. UCLA has a strong legacy of graduating influential African American leaders, activists, and professionals. This legacy includes prominent alumni such as Dr. Ralph Bunche, Jackie Robinson, Tom Bradley, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Johnnie

Cochran, Arthur Ashe, and Congresswoman Diane Watson, as well as thousands of other less prominent black alumni who have made and are making important contributions to the state and their local communities.

Furthermore, Los Angeles has the second largest African American population (876,304) of all the nation's counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The Los Angeles Unified School District's student population is 10 percent black — approximately 180,000 pupils (CBEDS, 2004-2005). This large African American constituency is severely underserved by UCLA, which raises questions about the degree to which this public university "owned by the people of California" is living up to its mission.

UCLA's mission extends beyond the needs of the individual student and reaches for the greater good of society. As a public land grant institution, UCLA is mandated to serve and enroll students that reflect the state's general population. Accordingly, "[campus] diversity — including racial, ethnic, economic, social, and geographic — remains a core institutional value for UCLA," primarily because of its educational benefits and the need to create a more democratic and egalitarian society.<sup>6</sup> UCLA's recent inability to satisfy this mandate, to preserve the quality of educational experience and service to the state that diversity ensures, has been cause for grave concern.

Rethinking UCLA's current admissions scheme in light of the University's mission is imperative if the campus is to offer a diverse learning environment *and* enhance its capacity to serve the public good. Only by admitting a student body that includes a critical mass of deserving African American students, we argue, will UCLA realize either of these goals.

Supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, UCLA's Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies established the College Access Project for African Americans (CAPAA) in 2002 to examine the crisis of severe underrepresentation confronting African Americans in California's public institutions of higher education. Currently, CAPAA is documenting specific admissions practices that disadvantage underrepresented students at each of the nine undergraduate UC campuses.<sup>7</sup> The focus of this report — the fourth in a series — is the role that an overly narrow definition of "merit" plays in limiting African American access to UCLA.

## How Did Declining African American Admissions Recently Become the Status Quo at UCLA?

Two key myths circulate in the halls of UCLA (and elsewhere in the UC system) that promote the decline of African American undergraduate admissions. The first is a belief that Proposition 209 excuses UCLA's administration from taking a proactive stance on the recent crisis in African American access to the campus. The second is the conviction that the decline of African American admissions to the most selective UC campuses like UCLA primarily is due to a California K-12 system that has prepared too few African American students who are "competitive" (as opposed to "eligible").<sup>8</sup>

At UCLA, these rationales serve as key components of the ideological foundation on which the current system of admissions and recruitment rests. Below we explain why these myths are misguided and how they function in maintaining African American underrepresentation as the status quo at UCLA. Specifically, we examine how these myths divert attention away from the problems embedded in the way UCLA defines and operationalizes "merit" in its admissions process, as well as how such practices work to the detriment of most applicants from underrepresented groups.

### Myth #1: "Our Hands Are Tied" — UCLA Admissions and the Unwillingness to Think Beyond 209

In relation to higher education, Proposition 209 prohibits state-funded institutions from granting "preferential treatment" on the basis of race in admissions, recruitment, or retention programs. It *also* stipulates that no state-funded institution may discriminate against individuals on the basis of such attributes. As is the case at other UC campuses, admissions policies at UCLA must adhere to the dictates of Proposition 209 as well as the UC's admissions plan, known as "comprehensive review."

Comprehensive review identifies 14 criteria from which selective UC campuses can draw upon to make admissions decisions that, to some degree, consider the opportunities and challenges applicants have faced.<sup>9</sup> Yet, it is important to note that academic performance, as measured by traditional indicators of "merit" (grade point averages (GPAs) and standardized

test scores), by far carries the most weight in the UC admissions review process.

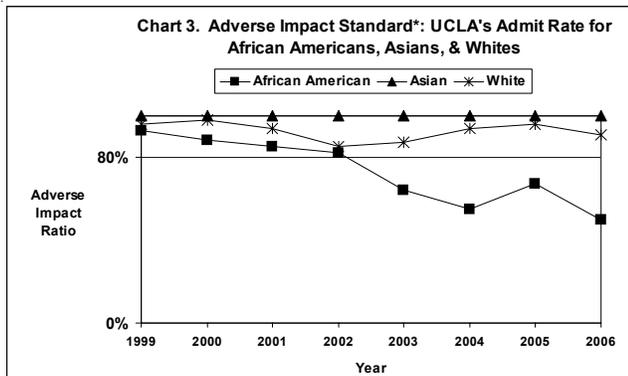
In accordance with the broad outline of comprehensive review, UCLA's current admissions scheme does consider an applicant's life challenges and personal achievements in the admissions review process. But UCLA's scheme — in which different readers only review select parts of the application — fails to holistically consider these variables as the context for academic achievement. (For more discussion on UCLA's admissions scheme, see Bunche Research Report, 2006). Instead, these variables are calculated separately from academic achievement, with the reader who weighs academic achievement never considering an applicant's personal life story. In other words, UCLA's admissions scheme does not provide a mechanism for allowing admissions officials to fully take into account how students' academic achievement may be impacted by their schooling opportunities or individual life experiences. For African Americans, whom research has shown often attend segregated and under-resourced schools where opportunities to learn are severely lacking,<sup>10</sup> the impact of such an admissions scheme is extremely damaging.

One popular rationale for UCLA's "assembly-line" model is that it facilitates adherence to Proposition 209's prohibitions against considering race in university admissions. Indeed, academic rank is assigned by readers who do not know the applicant's name and who have access to little information about his or her high school. When questioned if the model could be changed to include mechanisms that allow for a more equitable consideration of merit, admissions officials regularly claim that "our hands are tied by proposition 209." But what UCLA officials disregard in this defense is the fact that Proposition 209 also prohibits practices that *discriminate* on the basis of race and ethnicity. By not seeking an admissions scheme that provides a more equitable and reasonable balance of admissions criteria,<sup>11</sup> and by not proactively investigating how the current admissions scheme negatively and disproportionately impacts certain racial and ethnic groups, UCLA may actually violate the lesser-cited, anti-discrimination stipulation of Proposition 209.<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, the careful evaluation of race-neutral alternatives to the current scheme by admission officials is long overdue. UCLA, for example, should avoid approaching (as it currently does) each applicant as a generic entity. Given the broad range of school contexts in which different applicants

achieve, applicant files should be reviewed more holistically. UCLA should refrain from employing narrowly focused, “one-size-fits-all” academic criteria that rely too heavily on GPA and standardized test scores taken out of context.

Although UCLA officials prioritize the race neutral guidelines of Proposition 209 in the current admissions scheme, it should be noted that UCLA must also adhere to the federal adverse impact standard associated with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. With respect to college admissions, this standard establishes that an institution’s admissions procedures adversely impact (or discriminate against) individuals of a particular group when the group’s admission rate<sup>13</sup> is less than 80 percent of the admission rate for the most highly admitted group. At UCLA, the admission rate of African Americans relative to those for Asian Pacific Islanders and whites<sup>14</sup> failed to achieve this standard in every year since 2002 (see Chart 3).



\* Federal standard establishes that an admissions process adversely impacts a group when the group’s admission rate is less than 80% of the admissions rate for the most highly admitted group.

Note: UCLA failed to achieve this standard from 2003-2006.

Source: University of California Office of the President (UCOP) Admissions Files (UCAP Release), 2006.

While there is no doubt that Proposition 209 has been a roadblock for deserving black students applying to UCLA, we find it inexcusable that university officials would use the law as justification for *not* overhauling the campus’ admissions process. Proposition 209 does not define “merit.” To suggest otherwise simply indicates a lack of concern for deserving students from underrepresented commu-

nities of color, not to mention a total disregard for federal civil rights legislation.

### Myth #2: “It’s a Pool Problem” — How the Reality of K-12 Inequalities Diverts Attention Away from the Existence of Deserving Minority Applicants

Another myth used to explain the declining African American presence at UCLA is the notion that there are too few deserving black students in the UC applicant pool. This rationale blames the rampant inequities that exist in California’s K-12 system and acknowledges that African American and other underrepresented students experience these conditions in much greater proportions than their white and Asian peers. The rationale goes on to contend that once the inequities of K-12 are resolved, African American students will be better prepared and therefore flow into the state’s higher education institutions in numbers more consistent with their share of the college-aged population.

Ward Connerly, the anti-affirmative action activist and former UC Regent, is a major proponent of the “small pool” rationale. He has argued that removing race-conscious admissions policies in higher education, combined with the concomitant decline in the presence of students of color at the state’s most elite public institutions, will motivate officials to fix the inequities that exist in primary and secondary education.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, while Connerly argues that the goal of racial equity would best be served through the improvement of K-12 education, the conservative forces that support him continue to funnel millions of dollars that might otherwise be invested in poorly resourced schools into anti-affirmative action campaigns. His supporters also oppose desegregation plans that would help level a severely imbalanced K-12 playing field.

While the motives of the Connerly camp are suspect at best, some UC admissions officials also invoke the “small pool” myth in order to explain the recent decline in African American admissions to the most elite campuses. For these officials, the myth has appeal because it shifts the blame to a well-known and long-standing reality – K-12 inequities – that is outside their domain. It also diverts public attention away from the existence of any vestiges of institutional racism that may be lurking within the UC admissions process itself.

Clearly, schooling inequities disproportionately impact African American students in California who seek admission to selective institutions of

higher education. But the “small pool” myth cannot fully explain the admissions crisis at UCLA. In the ten years since the implementation of Proposition 209, the number of UC-eligible African American high school graduates has more than doubled (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2004). In 2006 alone, UCLA received over 1,900 applications from African American students for freshman admission (UCOP, 2006b).

At UCLA (and other selective UC campuses) the determination of student “merit” is typically presented as a race-neutral issue, one that hinges on the rather narrow consideration of high school GPA and test scores. As previously mentioned, UCLA employs a three-dimensional admissions matrix (e.g. academic achievement, personal achievements, and life challenges) in which comprehensive review factors are scored independently, yet viewed together for the final admissions decision (see Bunche Research Report, 2006). With respect to academic achievement, UCLA’s admissions scheme establishes rigid GPA and SAT cutoff points to define standard profiles for a series of achievement ranks to which applicants are assigned. Although admissions officials do not set the weights in advance, these numbers-driven academic achievement rankings clearly trump the other comprehensive review factors considered in the admissions decision.

Research shows that GPA is often a better predictor of college success than standardized tests (see Astin, 1993, Wightman, 2003). But there is little known about how well either of these traditional academic indicators predict college success beyond a certain threshold. That is, there is no evidence that a student who has a 3.4 GPA will more likely succeed in college compared to a student who has a 3.7, or 3.9. — or even a 4.5.

In this sense, the meaning a campus like UCLA associates with relatively small differences in the GPAs and test scores of high-achieving students is dubious at best. This point is particularly salient when we consider that awarding extra GPA points for higher-level courses helps more privileged students inflate their credentials *and chances* in the college admissions game (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). High-achieving students who attend schools in more affluent communities are likely to have access to advanced preparatory (AP) resources and educational experiences often denied equally talented students who attend schools in less affluent communities (Allen, 2005; Teranishi, Allen, & Solorzano, 2004). This is one of the reasons that socioeconomic status is positively associated with

higher GPAs and test scores, which in turn increase an applicant’s chances of admission to the most selective UC campuses (Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez, 2003).

In short, while persistent K-12 inequities make it difficult for many minority students to compete fairly with students from more privileged backgrounds, the so-called “pool problem” has more to do with how “merit” is defined than with actual talent. In fact, there are more than enough high-achieving and interested California high school students to completely reverse the recent declines in African American admissions to UCLA.

### **Thwarted by Generic Notions of “Merit:” Vignettes of Deserving African American Applicants Recently Rejected by UCLA**

In order to more concretely highlight the problems inherent in the way UCLA currently defines and weighs “merit” in its admissions scheme, CAPAA has compiled the stories of high-achieving African American students who recently applied to UCLA for admission but were denied access. The three vignettes presented below are particularly telling in light of the exceedingly small number of African American applicants granted admission to UCLA in recent years. These examples — which represent just a small sample of the high-achieving black students rejected by UCLA — expose the “pool problem” for the myth it is and underscore the degree to which UCLA’s generic approach to “merit” is socially irresponsible.

#### *Academic Excellence in Spite of Life Challenges (vignette 1)*

Lindsay<sup>16</sup> is a dedicated and intelligent African American student who has been a high achiever since elementary school, where she was awarded a Presidential Honors award signed by President Clinton. She was a flutist in elementary school and continued to play in the marching bands in junior high and high school. Boosted by the honors and AP classes provided at her school, Lindsay’s GPA was approximately 4.2. Moreover, she managed to achieve academically despite enduring considerable medical hardships. A 52-degree scoliosis curve in her back required her to undergo an 8-hour corrective surgery. She was home schooled for approximately six weeks following the surgery, which resulted in some complications. During this time, however, she continued to receive “As” on her home assignments and returned to her high school shortly after her complications were resolved. This is the

dedication that Lindsay has exemplified in everything she does. She was denied admission to UCLA.

### *Soured on UCLA* (vignette 2)

Michael graduated from a good, suburban high school in California with a 4.5 GPA and combined SAT scores of 1370. UC Berkeley, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cornell, UC San Diego and other UC campuses saw fit to offer him admission to their freshman classes. One of Michael's classmates, who was white and had comparable grades and test scores, was admitted to UCLA. Michael's unexplainable rejection by UCLA has provoked his family to decide that his sister (who has slightly higher grades) will not apply to the campus as previously planned.

### *Enraged Alum* (vignette 3)

Michelle, a white UCLA alumna, wrote to CAPAA explaining that she was embarrassed that her alma mater claimed it could not find qualified African American students. She described three students that she knows in the San Diego area who all applied to UCLA. One student was a white male who attended a highly rated magnet school. He had a GPA below 4.0, his parents both had advanced degrees, and he was accepted by UCLA. This student's girlfriend, a Latina who attended the same highly rated magnet school, was first in her family to attend college, had a 4.0 GPA, but was rejected by the campus. The third student — an African American male student who attended one of the highest-rated suburban school's in San Diego — was vice president of a student organization, a varsity wrestler, participated in community service, and achieved a GPA in excess of 4.0. He was offered admission to UC Riverside, UC Santa Barbara, USC, and an Ivy League school. He was rejected by UCLA.

### **Conclusions**

In the final analysis, the problem with UCLA's current admissions scheme is that its central mechanism for determining an applicant's "merit" lacks sensitivity to the context in which the applicant actually achieved. It is a scheme that relies much too heavily on minute differences in numbers and gross rankings. While this scheme is promoted as fair, balanced, and neutral, its propensity to disproportionately block access to deserving African American students (and other underrepresented minorities) reveals the institutional racism at its core.

UCLA's admissions scheme is in dire need of an overhaul.

In fact, other elite institutions are taking seriously the need to move away from an over-reliance on traditional indicators of merit. At these schools, administrators and admissions officers recognize that the change must be one that reconnects admissions principles with *both* educational principles *and* social responsibility (Thacker, 2004). In other words, these universities are beginning to rethink merit in ways that incorporate the degree to which students exemplify the ideal of community service — an ideal, incidentally, that lies at the core of the UC mission.

Characteristics such as creativity, imagination, activism, problem solving, and a dedication to fighting social ills are indicators of merit not typically captured by GPAs or standardized test scores. Elite schools such as Swarthmore, Tufts, Barnard, Amherst, University of Wisconsin, University of Washington and others have begun to more seriously consider these other important indicators and to beat their addiction to the numbers (Bombardieri, 2006; Jaschik, 2006; Perry, 2005). It is time for UCLA and other highly-selective campuses in the UC system to follow suit.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> UCLA's Fall 2006 expected enrollment data is gathered from UCOP's "Statement of Intent to Register (SIR)" data (2006c). For UCLA enrollment data for previous years, see: [http://www.aim.ucla.edu/data/students/entering/newFreshmen93\\_05.pdf](http://www.aim.ucla.edu/data/students/entering/newFreshmen93_05.pdf) at [http://www.aim.ucla.edu/data\\_students.html](http://www.aim.ucla.edu/data_students.html).

<sup>2</sup> Of the 96 African American freshmen, 20 are recruited student athletes.

<sup>3</sup> Because federal regulations did not require public institutions to document race/ethnicity for enrollment data until 1973, we are unable to determine the exact year that African American enrollment at UCLA was as low as the Fall 2006 figures. However, it should be noted, that enrollment trends show that the enrollment of African American freshman was probably not as low as Fall 2006 figures since most likely the mid-1960s.

<sup>4</sup> Underrepresented students within the UC-system include African Americans, American Indians, and Latinas/os. Although, some Asian groups are overrepresented in college admissions in California, it is important to note that not all Asian nationalities/ethnicities are well-represented. For more information on the representation of different Asian nationalities in the UC system, see UCOP, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> The two UC flagships, UC Berkeley and UCLA, have had the largest decline in African American admissions since the implementation of Proposition 209. The admission of African Americans at UC Berkeley has declined 50% in the 10 year period, 1996-2006.

<sup>6</sup> Carnesale, A. Diversity at UCLA—Chancellor's statement. Retrieved August 8, 2006 from <http://www.gdnet.ucla.edu/gasaa/admissions/diversity.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> There are a total of 10 UC campuses. However, UC San Francisco (UCSF) does not enroll undergraduates. Thus, this report only discusses the undergraduate

admissions process at the other nine UC campuses (UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UCLA, UC Merced, UC Riverside, UC San Diego, and UC Santa Barbara).

<sup>8</sup> UC eligibility occurs when one meets the minimum requirements for admission into the University of California. However, to gain admission into the more selective UC campuses (like UCLA), one must have a much more competitive background, including a stellar academic record and numerous personal achievements. It is important to note that all UC campuses (with the exception of UC Merced) require students to show characteristics *above* UC-eligibility requirements to be considered for admission. For more information on UC eligibility and selectivity, see Bunche Research Report, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on how Comprehensive Review Guidelines are implemented at UCLA, see: [http://www.admissions.ucla.edu/Prospect/Adm\\_fr/FrSel.htm](http://www.admissions.ucla.edu/Prospect/Adm_fr/FrSel.htm). For more general information on UC's Comprehensive Review Plan, see: <http://www.ucop.edu/news/comprev/welcome.html>.

<sup>10</sup> For a description of the problems in California's segregated public schools, see: California Educational Opportunity Report: Roadblocks to College (2006), <http://www.edopp.org>.

<sup>11</sup> For more ideas on considerations for a fair and equitable admissions model, see: Laird, B. (2005). *The Case for Affirmative Action in University Admission*. Berkeley, CA.: Bay Tree Publishing.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that UC Berkeley's admissions process and its definition of academic merit under Proposition 209 was challenged in court. A 1999 federal civil rights lawsuit, *Castaneda v. Regents of the University of California*, charged that qualified and deserving students of color were denied equal opportunity to compete for admission, largely resulting from undue and unjustified reliance on standardized test scores to make admission decisions. To settle this pending lawsuit, UC Berkeley officials eventually implemented "comprehensive review" which supposedly creates a fairer and more equitable admissions process for all applicants.

<sup>13</sup> The admission rate is equal to the number of admitted students divided by the number of applicants.

<sup>14</sup> Asian Pacific Islanders and whites have the highest admittance rates among all race/ethnic groups at UCLA.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on Connerly's position on affirmative action see: "UCLA sees sharp drop in black enrollment" [Radio Broadcast], *News & Notes with Ed Gordon*, NPR, June 14, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Names of students in each vignette have been changed to protect their identities.

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## About the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies

Established in 1969 as an organized research unit (ORU) of the University of California, Los Angeles, the Ralph J. Bunche Center is one of the oldest centers in the nation devoted to the study of African American life, history, and culture. For more information, please visit [www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu](http://www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu).

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