

# Local students lose edge for entry to SDSU

Budget cuts force end of guarantee for 'service area'

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Steve Habba, 17, a senior at Valhalla High School in El Cajon, spoke with school counselor Elaine Swatniki, who held a class for seniors on how to plan for their post-secondary education. *Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune - SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE/ZUMA PRE*

## SDSU FRESHMEN BY THE NUMBERS

3.41: Average grade-point average of freshmen in SDSU's service area

1,013: Average SAT math and writing scores of freshmen in SDSU's service area

3.81: Average GPA of freshmen outside SDSU's service area

1,179: Average SAT math and writing scores of freshmen outside SDSU's service area

SOURCE: San Diego State University

"Our students have always had to have a higher GPA to get into San Diego State. They don't think it's fair."

*KATHY BLOOMFIELD*, a college and career adviser at Westview High School in Rancho Peñasquitos



Valhalla High School seniors attended a class to help them prepare for and apply to college. This year's seniors will lose SDSU's admissions guarantee. *Nelvin C. Cepeda / Union-Tribune*

It's about to get harder for thousands of local high school students to get into San Diego State University.

In an effort to address severe state budget cuts, SDSU will end its admissions guarantee to most local students who take the required courses and meet the minimum California State University grades and standardized test scores.

Since 2002, SDSU has had a two-tiered system that entitled admission to students in its so-called service area. Students who graduate from high schools south of state Route 56 or in Imperial County gained admission with lower grades and test scores than those outside that area.

The average grade-point average for this year's freshmen from within the service area was 3.41. For all other freshmen, it was 3.81.

Starting with the fall 2010 admissions cycle, which accepts applications beginning Oct. 1, there will be a universal eligibility system for most prospective students.

The change has prompted mixed reactions.

"It's really worrying me," said Austin Weiland, a Valhalla High School senior whose top college choice is SDSU.

Weiland is planning to retake the SAT next month and apply to several additional schools as a result of the new policy.

Some counselors welcome the change because it levels the playing field.

"It appears to be more fair," said Kathy Bloomfield, a college and career adviser at Westview High School in Rancho Peñasquitos, which is about one mile north of state Route 56. "Our students have always had to have a higher GPA to get into San Diego State. They don't think it's fair."

Campus officials say they still will provide local applicants with extra credit in the admissions process, but they have not decided how much.

Last year, SDSU received 55,000 applicants, and about 55 percent of freshmen came from its service area. Officials say the goal is to maintain the same ratio, although with a smaller student population.

The campus also hopes to maintain the same proportion of minority students, who make up about 44 percent of undergraduates, said Sandra Cook, SDSU's assistant vice president for academic affairs.

While the university is changing its admissions policy on a broad scale, it will continue its Compact for Success program with Sweetwater Union High School District in South County and Hoover High School in San Diego's City Heights neighborhood. Those agreements guarantee admission to students who maintain a 3.0 GPA and fulfill other requirements. The program yields about 200 students who enroll at SDSU each year.

The change in the overall admissions guarantee is one of several moves announced this week to help cut enrollment by 2,750 students next fall. Combined with a reduction of 1,850 students this year, the campus will shrink to 29,030 students next fall, a 14 percent drop.

Among other changes:

- Students will need to apply to a specific major, meaning their chances of getting in will depend on how many other applicants apply to the major, how qualified those applicants are, and how many slots are available in that major.
- Transfer students from community colleges will need to complete all general education and preparation for their major, and meet a minimum GPA of 2.4 or higher, depending on demand for their major. Only those who complete all the course work at local community colleges will be guaranteed a transfer spot.
- Graduate student enrollment will drop for the first time. Applicants likely will be able to submit applications only in the fall, not the spring, for the next two years.

The enrollment cuts are just part of SDSU's attempt to address \$55 million in state budget cuts this year. They come on the heels of decisions to increase student fees by 30 percent, slash course offerings and implement furloughs for the vast majority of campus employees.

SDSU President Stephen Weber said the changes are painful, but necessary to make sure enrolled students receive a quality education.

"If we have to ration educational opportunity, which is a shameful reality for the state of California, then we want to be able to give opportunity to people who are most likely to succeed," Weber said. "That should be our primary criteria."

The news gives this year's high school seniors little time to act.

Counselors are urging seniors who want to improve their chances to retake the SAT by November.

"SDSU is going to become a more selective college," said Tom Pew, the head counselor at El Cajon's Valhalla High. Pew estimated that at least one-quarter of his seniors apply to SDSU. "So the message to our students is, 'You've got to become better prepared to be competitive.'"

Weiland, the Valhalla senior, would have been assured admission in past years with his unweighted GPA of 3.7 and SAT math and reading scores of 1080.

"My primary choice is SDSU, but now I'm thinking about applying to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, (University of San Diego) and Long Beach State, just to be safe," Weiland said.

Counselors say losing the local entitlement will take away certainty and discourage students who have been unsure about their ability to go to college.

"It will be very frustrating to many students," said Nancy Regas, a counselor at Patrick Henry High School, about two miles north of SDSU. "If they weren't sure they could go to college, we used the guarantee as leverage and encouragement to say, 'Yes, you can.'"

SDSU was not alone in providing a guarantee to local students. Within the 23-campus California State University system, all other campuses that receive more applicants than they can accommodate have similar guarantees for their local students.

The change requiring students to specify a major before enrolling already has prompted questions from high school counselors. They wonder if students will try to game the system by applying to one major they perceive as easier to get into, and then change it later.

Students will not benefit from that strategy, said Cook, the SDSU assistant vice president. Less popular majors may seem easier to get into, but they also have fewer available spots.

Cook added that it will be important for SDSU applicants to apply to more schools this year.

"Students really need to have some alternate plans," Cook said. "I can't stress that enough."

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