

AFTER 209: NOW WE MUST RAISE ACHIEVEMENT OF K-12 KIDS

By Richard C. Atkinson
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THE University of California made headlines recently with the news of dramatic declines in the number of underrepresented minorities -- African-American, Latino and Native American students -- admitted for the freshman class that will enter this fall at our Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses.

Although the numbers for the UC system suggest far less dramatic declines, the message is clear nonetheless: In this post-Proposition 209 era, when race and ethnicity can no longer be used in admissions, the only way to reflect the population of California in our student body is by raising the level of educational achievement in our K-12 schools.

Of UC's more than 800 programs devoted to supporting and strengthening education in the schools, some of the most exciting are those that use computers and the Internet. UC is a national leader in educational technology, and we are using this advantage to create a new kind of outreach to California's children.

One such program, UC Links, is a computer-based after-school activity for children, primarily in the elementary grades. With the help of UC student tutors, for example, a child can explore the world of numbers (by setting a virtual clock) or discover the many dimensions of language (by creating a story to go with computer-generated pictures).

UC Links benefits communities because parents have the security of knowing that their children are learning and playing in a safe environment during the hours between school and home. It benefits UC students by offering them field training that integrates theory and practice in the areas of child development, language, culture, and learning. Most important of all, UC Links benefits children by teaching them not only the basics of reading and mathematics but also computer and cognitive skills.

UC faculty are using the program as a research laboratory to expand our understanding of what works and what doesn't work in helping children learn.

All UC Links sites will ultimately be connected by the Internet, creating a network of virtual classrooms spanning California and offering opportunities for dialogue among students, K-12 teachers, faculty, and staff. UC Links now serves over 1000 children at 20 sites around the state, each site adapted to the unique needs of the community's children and their families. We hope to double the number of sites by this time next year, and to double the number again the following year.

Another initiative, UC Nexus, brings together UC faculty, staff, and students with their counterparts in the K-12 schools to develop ways of using computers and the Internet

for learning both inside and outside the classroom. As its name suggests, UC Nexus is dedicated to creating connections among people and ideas. Current plans include a Website that will allow K-12 teachers to chat with each other and to collaborate with UC colleagues on curricula, teaching, and access to UC's digital collections of art, history, science, and many other subjects.

Why is technology vital to these efforts? UC has had programs to assist teachers and to help students qualify for admission to college for more than three decades. The principal limit on their effectiveness, however, was the sheer size of California's K-12 system and the resulting impossibility of reaching all the schools and all the children who can benefit. With today's computer and Internet technologies we can eliminate at least some of the boundaries that have held us back. Already we are working with schools across the state on a scale that would have been impossible even a few years ago.

UC Links and UC Nexus are at the cutting edge of a much larger effort by UC to work with our K-12 partners to make our schools as good as they can and must be. We are committed to doubling UC's investment in outreach -- from \$60 million to \$120 million a year -- with help from the K-12 schools, the state and federal governments, and the private sector. Our intent is to create opportunities to learn for many thousands of young people and to change lives throughout this state.

This is an extraordinarily ambitious goal. It is only realistic to recognize that our efforts may not be enough, given the vast dimensions of the problem. But there are some issues so important to California that the larger failure would be not to try.

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