



September 11, 2026

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RE: Items B5 and A1: Standardized Testing, STEM Outcomes, & Math Innovation

Dear University of California Regents and Academic Senate Leaders,

As University of California leadership embarks on a review of the role of standardized testing for admissions, it is essential to bear in mind the university's public mission. Unlike private universities, the UC has a responsibility to serve the population of the state—not only with respect to who campuses admit, but also how they set readiness expectations and communicate them to California students, families, and schools.

The call for reinstating the SAT and ACT originated with reports of declining math preparation among UC students. Before prescribing a solution, the university needs a clearer picture of the problem those tests would ostensibly remedy.

There is general agreement across the nation that students' math performance has been declining for at least a decade. But the precise implications for the UC system

are surprisingly unclear, in part because of the outsize media focus on cherry-picked data and misleading analyses from one campus.

No common definition of math readiness exists across the system. Furthermore, how individual departments determine whether students are ready for calculus and which prerequisite courses are needed varies widely, with limited transparency. Campuses use indicators ranging from high school transcripts and assessments to various college placement tests. They also employ a range of prerequisite sequences, ranging from zero to four courses. A subset of these are pre-college remedial courses. Nevertheless, as highlighted in Wednesday's discussion item and in prior UC reports, the vast majority of freshmen (85 percent) requiring a math course are able to start their math sequence with Calculus I or a higher course.

Not only do the policies differ across campuses, they also sometimes vary at the campus level from year to year. For example, UC Berkeley's math department does not assign students to math courses. But it uses math assessments for diagnostic purposes. Before 2020, it used an instrument called ALEKS. In fall 2021, 2022, and 2023, it used the MDTP (Mathematics Diagnostic Testing Project) test. No math placement information has been released for 2024 and 2025, but in those years Berkeley's school of engineering piloted the use of MDTP to recommend math courses to students.

Another example comes from UCSD: In changes not disclosed in the campus' faculty report on admissions, that campus's math department moved the goalposts on math preparation several times. In 2024, it [raised the cut-off score](#) for a student to place into precalculus, the lowest college-level course. It also [stopped allowing students to use calculators](#) on the placement exam. That same year, it created a second pre-college remedial course, so that students with the lowest placement scores would have to take at least two quarters of remedial math before precalculus, instead of one.

With no change in students' underlying preparation levels, each of these shifts would assign more students to pre-college classes. It is not known if other undisclosed changes were made to placement practices, but the known 2024 changes coincided with a near-doubling in the number of students assigned to pre-college courses. It would be misguided to attribute that increase to the test-blind policy, which had been in place for four years by that point.

It is also a mistake to attribute the increase to enrollments from schools serving disadvantaged students (LCFF+ schools), as UCSD's report did. Between 2022 and 2024, pre-college enrollments at UCSD more than doubled from 390 to 916, while

students from LCFF+ schools declined by more than 10 percent. LCFF+ students cannot explain the increase.

In contrast to UCSD, where more than 1200 (16%) students each year enroll across four courses below calculus, UCB enrolled 264 students (7%) and UCLA enrolled fewer than 200 (5%) students in precalculus, the lowest level courses on those campuses. UC Santa Barbara does not offer precalculus. Are UCSB students that much more proficient than those at the three other campuses? Are UCLA's students better prepared than UCSD's? Or can the differences be attributed to the choice of mathematical onramps to STEM majors? Examples such as UCLA's redesigned math course for life sciences majors suggests that the latter might be the case. But without a common benchmark, the answer is not clear.

The current information item on STEM Outcomes and Math Innovation helps shed light on questions of math preparation, but further analysis and greater transparency are needed to clarify the extent to which math preparation is a problem across the UC system and reveal the range of strategies available to address it, not just policies to alter the makeup of incoming classes.

In particular, we urge the regents to seek answers to the following questions:

Math Index. UCSD faculty, in their November 2025 report on math preparation, recommended adopting a math index to use in admitting students in Fall 2026.

- Upon first use of the index for the 2026 applicant pool, how does math readiness of the incoming class—e.g. the proportion of students assigned to pre-college remedial courses—look compared to prior years? Do these outcomes reflect what the index was intended to predict.
- If the math index were applied retroactively to preceding classes including the Fall 2019 entering class, admitted with standardized test scores, how would it define the math readiness of those classes?

Instruction. How are faculty across the system adapting their classroom instruction to best onramp students into STEM majors? What approaches show the most promise for students' persistence and success in subsequent courses?

Calculus and majors. UCSD requires roughly 80 percent of its students to take a calculus course (either as a graduation requirement or as a prerequisite for a major requirement). UCSD faculty recommended analyzing the "interplay between math

placement and majors” and reassessing whether there are majors that may be requiring calculus unnecessarily.

- What are the corresponding percentages for other UC campuses?
- Has UCSD conducted the analysis, and what has been the result?
- For UCSD’s incoming 2026 class, how does the breakdown by major of students assigned to pre-college math courses compare to prior years?

Community colleges. UCSB does not offer courses below calculus, but directs students to the local community college if they need preparation for calculus.

- How many UCSB students take a community college calculus prerequisite course?
- How does UCSB determine which students require a prerequisite?
- How effective has this strategy been at UCSB?
- Is this a viable strategy for other UC campuses?

Course redesign. Some campuses have redesigned their calculus sequences. These include UCLA (Math for Life Scientists) and UCR (Principles of Calculus). Instead of a prerequisite course, UCSB students can take a calculus course that incorporates precalculus content. What have been the outcomes in these sequences compared to more traditional offerings?

Just Equations is not alone in asking questions to get to the root causes of gaps in student math preparation and ensuring the evidence points us to the appropriate policy solutions. UC Berkeley Professor Jesse Rothstein published [an analysis of key questions about the role of SAT scores in college admissions](#), underscoring that a test-blind policy has served the university well.

Only with greater transparency and careful analysis of students’ math proficiency and current campus preparation strategies can UC regents and faculty leaders make an informed decision about how to address any preparation shortfalls through admissions and other means. Furthermore, given the need for high schools to better prepare students for success in mathematics in the UC system, the system should seek more avenues for communicating their expectations and further partner with California’s K-12 education system to support schools in filling them.

We urge the Board of Regents and Academic Senate to clearly define the problem at hand and let the evidence point to policy solutions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pamela S. Burdman". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Pamela" and last name "Burdman" clearly legible, and "S." as a small initial.

Pamela Burdman , Executive Director, Just Equations