U-T San Diego

The issue's more than academic

Moores gets flak, praise for criticism of UC admissions

By Eleanor Yang
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

December 13, 2003

John Jay Moores, the 347th richest man in America, remembers when he was so poor he had to hitchhike home from college. He'd be dropped off by a trucker and use a pay phone to signal his parents he was back in town. He'd only let the phone ring once before hanging up – to save the dime.

Now, at 59, Moores is the majority owner of the San Diego Padres and holds interests in dozens of properties and software companies. His net worth was estimated this year at $740 million by *Forbes* magazine.

Moores credits his success not to college degrees in economics and law but to sweat, fortuitous timing, personal relationships and brainpower.

Understanding Moores' background helps illustrate his fundamental belief that people can make it, as he did, without special consideration for admission to elite universities.

This philosophy is also what's driving Moores, as chairman of the University of California Board of Regents, to create waves in the nine-campus UC system.

The root of his concern is UC's comprehensive-review admissions process, which takes into account criteria beyond academic achievement. Moores believes the process weighs nonacademic factors, such as low family income and parent education levels, too heavily.

As a result, he says, it unfairly shuts out some (mostly suburban) students with greater academic accomplishments who, although they attended good high schools and took loads of honors courses, don't make the cut because they were not afforded extra considerations.

Moores jokingly refers to the 2-year-old admissions process as "compassionate review." He has serious concerns about whether UC is using it to inflate the number of minority students admitted – something that would be illegal under Proposition 209, which bars affirmative action.

Besides, California is such an "outrageously diverse" state that there's no way UC campuses wouldn't be diverse, he says.

In describing his motivation for taking on UC admissions, Moores likes to quote from the epic film "The Godfather":

"As the saying goes," he said recently, a smile spreading across his ruddy cheeks, " *'I believe in America.'* "

And in Moores' script: "America is supposed to be a meritocracy. Compassionate, but still a meritocracy."

Mounting complaints

At first, the complaints were just background noise. Moores would run into parents at baseball and football games who were upset their high-achieving kids had been rejected for UC admission.

But in the course of two years, he said, the volume grew louder.

Over the summer, Moores took the unusual step of obtaining UC admissions data and, out of his own pocket, commissioning a thick report that questioned its fairness. His research found that UC Berkeley accepted nearly 400 students with scores of 1000 or less on the SAT college entrance exam last year, while rejecting about 3,200 students with scores higher than 1400. The highest possible SAT score is 1600.

Some regents and parents applaud him, saying he has posed difficult questions and disclosed information that otherwise never would have surfaced.

Others, meanwhile, question Moores' tactics and motivation, and fear that his efforts could change the admissions policy and deny access to some students from lower-performing high schools with fewer opportunities.

Moores' decision to confront the UC administration on such a divisive issue is unusual, especially considering his avoidance of publicity in the past few years while dealing with political and business problems.

Moores fell under a cloud of suspicion after a corporate accounting scandal erupted at Peregrine Systems, the software development company he helped build. He has also battled accusations of bribery and unethical conduct arising from his efforts to build a $458 million ballpark for the Padres, financed with $157 million from the team and the rest from public agencies.

As a principal investor of Peregrine, Moores sold more than $400 million in stock during a 33-month period in which Peregrine's revenues were found to be overstated by more than $500 million. He led Peregrine's board for much of the 1990s, but stepped down as chairman before the accounting disclosures were made in May 2002.

Recently a federal judge dismissed Moores as a defendant in shareholder lawsuits alleging he was involved with the fraud at Peregrine.

Some associates, including Richard Lerner, president of The Scripps Research Institute, believe Moores has emerged from the worst of the disputes. Moores has been a longtime board member at Scripps, a private biomedical research organization that awards doctoral degrees.

"We gave him an honorary degree right in the middle of the problems with Peregrine because we wanted to weigh in and say, 'Everything you're hearing about John Moores is not the John we know,' " Lerner said.

And yet with the admissions debate, Moores, who was appointed to a 12-year term as a UC regent in 1999, has stirred up his own controversy. Despite warnings from friends, including his wife, Becky, Moores has tackled a volatile political issue complicated with undercurrents of race.

" 'You might be stirring up a hornet's nest,' " Moores recalls his wife cautioning.

"She was right."

Giving a boost

In John Moores' world, there is a distinct line between rooting for the underdog, and giving underdogs what he considers to be unfair advantages.

He directs his philanthropy at "stuff nobody else would do."

Although he's a UC regent, Moores has given considerably less money to UC San Diego than to the University of Houston, his alma mater, and San Diego State University – both public, commuter campuses where he believes students have made more sacrifices to attend college.

Former President Carter, whose Carter Center has received millions from the Mooreses to fight a debilitating disease known as river blindness, says their motivation is clear and selfless.

"I think John saw that in a precise, immediate and tangible way, he could get medicine into the mouths of suffering people at a crucial time," said Carter, a friend for more than 10 years.

And yet on the issue of preferential college admissions – decisions that could arguably put more poor and disadvantaged students on a trajectory to professional careers – Moores is less enthusiastic.

He suspects UC may be acting illegally by easing academic requirements to achieve a more diverse student body. Although UC officials repeatedly emphasize that race is not considered in admissions, Moores is skeptical.

Racial background may not be blatantly obvious to those reading the applications, he says, but it would be easy to surmise from the applicants' names and essays.

Students admitted with low scores and grades simply aren't prepared for a UC education, he says. He believes they are being set up to fail.

Moores, who voted for comprehensive review, says academic qualifications, now weighed by many campuses at 75 percent, ought to be given more consideration.

But some regents, faculty and students say that to focus completely on academic achievement would be short-sighted.

"The socially responsible goal of a public institution is to look at more than just GPA and test scores," said Barbara Sawrey, a UCSD professor who heads UC's faculty board of admissions. "We have to look at students' opportunities and what they did with them."

Personal history

Many of Moores' views can be traced to his personal experiences.

The son of a newspaper photographer and housewife, Moores was the first in his family to attend college. As one of four kids, Moores worked several jobs to contribute to the family.

Yet he considered it "unthinkable" not to go to college, and despite having married after his freshman year, earned a degree from the University of Houston. It took seven years as he juggled school with helping raise two children and working 60-hour weeks as a software programmer.

Afterward, uncertain of what to pursue, he followed his wife's lead, and sought a law degree. To this day, he considers the time spent in law school one of the biggest mistakes of his life and says he got nothing of value from it.

Ultimately, he made his fortune developing software – something that he taught himself on the job.

His personal experience helps explain why he hasn't been strict about his own kids attending college.

His daughter, Jennifer, left school after one year.

Moores recalled:

"She came home and said, 'Daddy, I hate this thing.'

"And I said 'That's fine with me, sweetie pie. I don't care.' My daughter is very smart. And will at some point take over the Padres."

His son, John Jr., writes and edits children's books.

In Moores' mind, intelligence, not a college diploma, is the bottom line.

At the same time, personal experience has led him to believe that students who fall too far behind in childhood or high school have slim chances of catching up.

Five years ago, Moores and his wife adopted twin teenage boys, about 14, who had come from a broken family. He recalls going through "SAT hell" trying to help them catch up with knowledge he expected they would have learned in elementary school, such as multiplication tables.

In considering the twins' college options, Moores said UC Berkeley would have been the last place he'd have looked. Competing in classes with better prepared kids would have been torturous for the twins, he said.

One of his sons started as a freshman this year at University of Arizona in Tucson. The other got married this summer and is contemplating attending community college next year.

Moores says he has long believed that attending college for the sake of drawing a higher salary is an idea that has been sold by the higher education establishment, greedy for money from the state and students.

"The value of a college education is far overrated," he said.

Former UC President Richard Atkinson agrees that simply going to college doesn't guarantee anything.

"It's not a thought that's expressed often, but there is considerable merit to it," Atkinson said.

Those sentiments are unusual coming from a chairman of the UC regents, but not uncharacteristic of John Moores.

Eleanor Yang: (619) 542-4564; eleanor.yang@uniontrib.com