

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Freshman Survey: The Changing Attitudes, Opinions, Aspirations of First Time Freshmen - 1996

The Freshmen Survey is administered to new students approximately every two to three years in order to provide the campus community with information on the changing background, goals, aspirations, and values of its first-time freshmen. The survey is part of a national study of higher education, conducted annually by the American Council of Education (ACE) and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

At UCSD, the Freshman Survey has been administered four times – in 1986, 1988, 1991, and in 1996. Information gleaned from the Freshman Survey, together with information gathered at admissions, has been influential in affecting changes in policy and procedures related to admissions effectiveness, recruitment, and retention. The campus is better prepared, for example, to consider recruitment and retention strategies with the benefit of information on such items as college choice, choice of major, student aspirations, and pre-college activities (e.g., volunteerism).

In this report to the campus community, selected findings obtained from the 1996 Freshman Survey are discussed in the context of previously obtained findings. Tables presenting complete statistical data obtained from each administration of the Freshman Survey appear in the Appendices of this Report.

FINANCIAL CONCERNS ON THE RISE FOR UCSD BOUND FRESHMEN

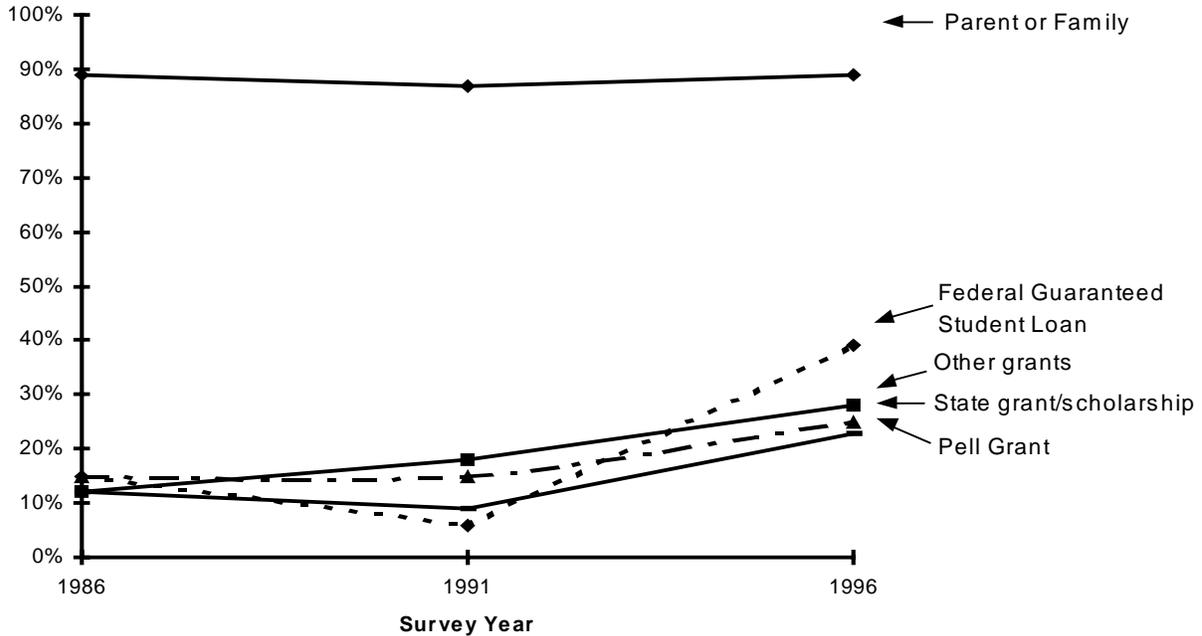
The trend toward fewer federal and state-aid dollars earmarked for college-bound students appears to have increased financial concerns for

UCSD bound freshmen. Survey data show that financial concerns play an ever-increasing role in students' choice of college. For example, "low tuition" is cited by nearly one-fourth (23%) of all 1996 respondents as being a "very important reason for choosing UCSD". In 1986, only 13% of all UCSD-bound freshmen cited "low tuition" as being "very important". "Offered financial assistance" is also cited as being "very important" (22% in 1996 compared to only 8% in 1986). Further, financial concerns are reflected in the proportion of 1996 freshmen (27%) citing "financial assistance" as the "one area where they will need the most help" while enrolled at UCSD.

GRANTS AND SCHOLARSHIPS BECOME INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT TO UCSD FRESHMEN.

Compared to previous freshman cohorts, a larger proportion of the 1996 freshman cohort indicated that scholarships and grants would be a source of their academic financial support. Although reliance on family for financial support remains relatively unchanged over the years, there is a trend toward increased dependence on grants and scholarships of various types (*see Figure 1*). The proportion of freshmen obtaining loans to support their college careers (39% in 1996 compared to 6% in 1991) has also increased substantially. Although freshmen express concerns over college costs, the number planning to work part- or full-time while in college has not changed substantially from one cohort to the next. The proportion of freshmen reporting a "very good chance" of getting a job to pay expenses ranges from 47% to 50%. And the proportion of freshmen reporting plans to "work full time" remains steady at approximately 2% to 3% (*see Appendix p.14*).

Figure 1
Anticipated Sources of Financial Aid



UCSD CHOSEN FOR REPUTATION OF ‘ACADEMIC RIGOR’

Increasing numbers of freshmen cite “reputation for academic rigor” as an important factor in their decision to enroll at UCSD. A large majority (60%) of the 1996 freshman cohort reported reputation for academic rigor as being “very important” compared to only 49% of the 1991 freshman cohort. The majority of the 1996 freshmen cohort (62%) also ranked UCSD as number one among other UC campuses to which they applied (*see Appendix p.10*).

Among perspective freshmen, UCSD’s “good academic reputation” was by far the most important factor influencing their decision to enroll (74% in 1996 compared to 69% in 1991). “Graduates get good jobs” and “graduates go to top graduate schools” were the second and third most frequently cited reasons for choosing UCSD (53% and 45%, respectively). The fact that more and more students cite these factors as being “very important” provide supportive evidence that UCSD’s academic reputation among students, parents, and the general public has improved considerably in recent years.

“GRADE INFLATION” CONTINUES.

The Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI) national norms show that college-bound freshmen are receiving higher high school grades than in the past. According to HERI, high school teachers are awarding higher grades “in what may be a reaction to the increasingly competitive college admissions process”. The nationwide trend toward higher grades is reflected in the responses of UCSD-bound freshmen. The proportion of freshmen reporting average high school grades of A or A+ rose from 24% in 1986 to 44% in 1996 (*see Appendix p.9*).

Some of the increase in high school grades reported by incoming freshmen is undoubtedly due to increased selectivity in undergraduate admissions. As a result of UCSD’s increased popularity among college-bound students, admission to UCSD has become increasingly competitive over the years. As a result, measures of academic preparation, including high school grades, are higher for more recently admitted students. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to assume that the higher grades reported by the 1996 freshman cohort are, as suggested by HERI, due in part to the national trend of “grade inflation”.

Despite higher grades, there appears to be a certain degree of academic disengagement among UCSD-bound students. The proportion of UCSD freshmen reporting being frequently “bored in class” reached 42% in 1996 compared to 33% in 1986. National figures mirror this trend. HERI reports that the number of college-bound high school students who reported being “bored in class” reached an all-time high in 1996 (36% compared to 26% in 1986).

GRADES ARE UP, BUT CONFIDENCE IS DOWN.

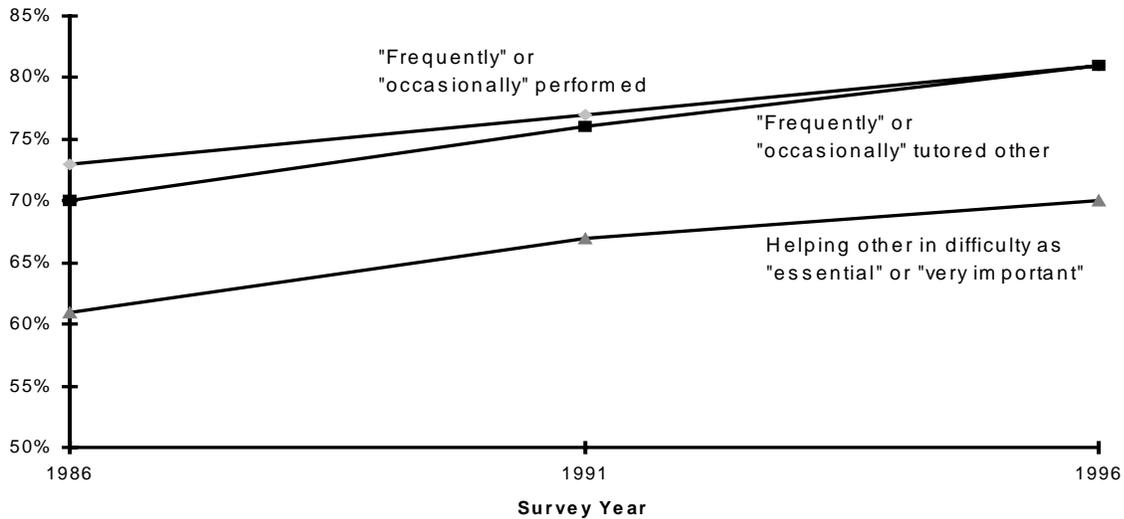
UCSD-bound freshmen report impressive gains in high school grades and test scores as well as the number college preparatory classes taken during high school. It would seem that freshmen are better prepared than ever for university work. Having considered this trend, it is puzzling to see that self-ratings of confidence and ability are lower among 1996 freshmen than among previous freshman cohorts. Self-ratings of “intellectual self-confidence” as being “above average” or in the “highest 10%” fell from 80% in 1986 to 63% in 1996. Social self-confidence ratings also declined -- from 62% in 1986 to 46% in 1996 (*see Appendix p.9*). Indeed, self-ratings in all areas including “academic ability”, “mathematics ability”, “writing ability”, and “leadership ability” have shown decreases from one cohort to the next. The self-deprecating pattern by UCSD freshmen is not consistent with national norms. HERI reports that in 1996 “self confidence is on the rise” with

small increases in the number of freshmen rating themselves “above average” or in the “highest 10%” in most academic areas. The decline in confidence among UCSD freshmen may be tied to UCSD’s increased reputation for academic rigor. When asked what their biggest problem or source of worry was for the coming year, 61% of all freshmen respondents indicated “doing well academically”. Only 47% of the 1991 freshman cohort responded similarly.

VOLUNTEERISM AND HELPING ATTITUDE UP AMONG UCSD FRESHMEN

“A record number of entering college freshmen report having performed volunteer work ‘frequently’ or ‘occasionally’ during the past year (71.8%).” This statement taken from 1996 HERI National Norms Report accurately describes UCSD-bound freshmen. In 1996, 90% of those students who responded to the Freshman Survey reported performing volunteer work “frequently” or “occasionally”. In comparison, 73% of the 1986 freshman cohort reported participating in volunteer activities. Similarly, the percent of UCSD freshmen who reported tutoring other students “frequently” or “occasionally” rose from 70% in 1986 to 81% in 1996 (*see Appendix p.19*). When asked about future objectives, 70% of 1996 freshmen cohort considered “helping others in difficulty” as “essential” or “very important”, compared to 61% of the 1986 cohort (*see Figure 2*).

**Figure 2
Volunteerism and Helping Behavior**

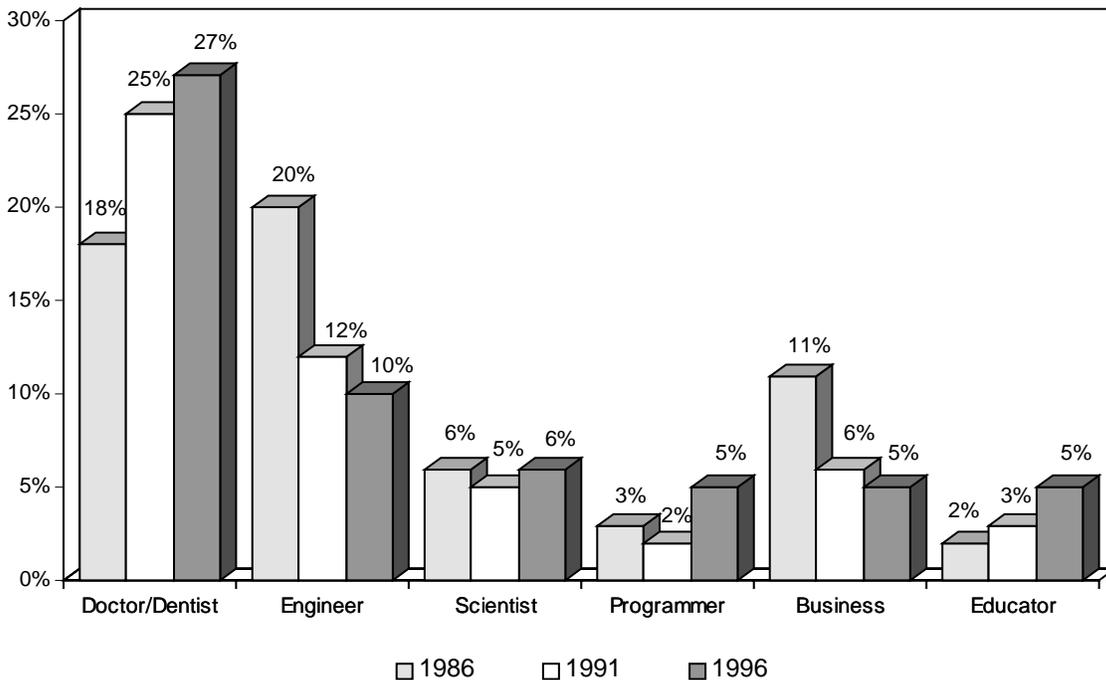


BIOLOGY IS MOST POPULAR AT UCSD

Biology was cited as students' probable major by a record 29% of 1996 UCSD-bound freshmen. A decade ago only 16% chose Biology as their probable major. (Engineering was the most popular major among the 1986 freshmen cohort (22%)). The popularity of biology as a major is reflected in students' choice of "Doctor / Dentist" as the most probable career-field. In

1996, 26% of all freshmen surveyed chose "Doctor / Dentist" as a probable career field compared to only 18% in 1986 (see Appendix p.15). Over the past decade there have been decreases in the number of UCSD freshmen reporting "engineering" and "business" as probable career fields and increases in those reporting "computer programmer" and "educator" as probable careers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Student's probable career



DISCUSSION

The findings presented here represent some of the highlights selected from the 1996 Freshmen Survey. The results indicate that UCSD's 1996 entering freshman class consists of highly motivated, academically prepared and socially conscious individuals with high educational and career objectives. From an institutional perspective, results from the Freshman Survey show that UCSD is gaining a reputation as a 'first choice' institution – one known for its academic rigor and excellence. Perspective students consider UCSD to be an academically challenging institution with good job opportunities and competitive graduate school entrance rates for its graduates.

Concomitant with its growing reputation as a first-rate institution is an increase in the "quality" of students (as measured by increases in the proportion of freshmen with average high school grades in the A to A+ range). A curious by-product of the increase in UCSD's reputation and quality of freshmen is a decline in students' reported self-confidence. There has been a small but steady decrease in student's intellectual and social self-confidence ratings over the years. "Doing well academically" continues to be the "biggest problem/source of worry" for new students.

Concerns over college costs appear to be on the rise nationwide as well as at UCSD. Indeed, results from the Freshman Survey indicate an increase in the numbers of students selecting UCSD for its "low tuition" and financial aid offerings. More and more college-bound students report having to rely on student loans and financial aid from federal and state agencies to cover college costs. Nonetheless, family support continues to be the most important factor in financing a college degree.

With increased interest in professional health careers, especially "Doctor/Dentist", Biology is named as the most likely major among UCSD-bound freshmen. On the academic front, the trend over the past decade has been one of decreased interest in engineering and business and

increased interest in medicine, education, and research. On the social front, the trend is one of increased volunteerism and helpful behavior. Compared to previous freshmen cohorts, a larger proportion of the 1996 freshmen cohort reported "helping others" to be a "very important" objective. Although the trend toward volunteerism is a national trend, the social-consciousness of UCSD freshmen seems to be higher than that of the 'average' college-bound student. The most important objective for a large proportion of the 1996 freshman class (78%), however, is "raising a family" – much the same as in 1991. And finally, political views remain rather consistent among first-time freshmen with the largest proportion (49%) reporting "middle of the road" views.

