

A Profile of Incoming Freshmen at the University of California, San Diego: Highlights from the 2004 National Freshman Survey

The Cooperative Institutional Research (CIRP) survey (also known as the “National Freshman Survey”) is part of the largest national assessment in higher education. Now in its 39th year, the UCLA survey is the nation’s longest running and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans. The survey serves as a resource for researchers, practitioners and policy makers throughout the world. Through the efforts of the six undergraduate colleges at UCSD last summer, 3,539 first-time UCSD freshmen were given the CIRP during college orientation sessions. This report presents a brief summary of selected highlights from the UCSD findings and compares these data to national norms for “highly selective” public colleges and universities, (N=42,017) and all public four-year colleges included in the national CIRP sample (62,839). In the following summary of highlights, page numbers are used to refer to the location of the tables containing the referenced UCSD and comparison data in the 2004 CIRP report for UCSD.

The survey instrument is revised annually to reflect the changing concerns of the academic community and of others who use the information. Reports from prior administrations of the CIRP at UCSD are available in the “Surveys” section on the UCSD Student Research and Information website (<http://studentresearch.ucsd.edu>) In addition, each of the six undergraduate colleges at UCSD receive individual reports about their incoming freshmen and new transfer students. The data are useful to the general community of current and future college students, their parents, and college faculty.

In 2004, the Freshman Survey was also administered to incoming students at seven of the eight general campuses of the University of California. It is anticipated that a report will be produced by the CIRP that will enable comparisons of the UCSD freshmen profile with other UC freshmen.

A major purpose of the Freshman Survey is to provide initial input or entry characteristics information for longitudinal research on new UCSD students. To that end, the Student Research and Information office also conducts an additional survey to gather follow-on data for the UCSD Freshman Survey respondents. The Your First College Year (YFCY) survey is sent to students at the end of the first year of college and uses many of the same items from the Freshman Survey in addition to questions concerning college experiences, behaviors, and perceptions. This survey, together with the Freshman survey provides useful data on first year student adjustment and change, and enables a clearer focus on the impact of various college experiences over time by controlling for the entry characteristics and dispositions of the student. Reports from prior administrations of the YFCY integrated with longitudinal data from the Freshman Survey are also available from the “Surveys” section of the Student Research and Information website.

Recent press releases and reports about the CIRP have focused on the shifting political and social attitudes, grade inflation, and academic engagement among the nation’s freshmen, and increasing anxiety over financing college. These reports use data based on the 2004 freshman norms obtained from the responses of 289,452 students at 440 of the nation’s baccalaureate colleges and universities. The national data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.2 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2004. Because the

national data also includes a substantial number of private and liberal arts colleges, the comparisons in this report focus on highly selective public colleges and universities, and all public four-year colleges regardless of selectivity.

Demographics

A somewhat larger proportion of UCSD freshmen are under the age of 19 (84%) compared with highly selective colleges (74%), and much higher proportion are in this age category compared with all public universities in the sample of 62,239 students nationwide (66%).

The entering UCSD sample is comprised of substantially fewer Caucasian students (40%), compared with highly selective colleges (73%) and all colleges (75%), and somewhat fewer African American students (UCSD-2%; highly selective and all colleges-5%). UCSD has a much higher proportion of Asian-American students in the sample (49%), compared with other highly selective institutions (19%), and all public institutions (14%). UCSD also has a higher proportion of Mexican American-Chicano-Latino students (12%), compared with other highly selective institutions at 2%, and all public colleges at 4%. (p.1)

UCSD students report average higher grades achieved during high school with 82% reporting an average grade of A+ to A-, compared with 67% reporting these similar grades in high school among highly selective colleges. (p. 1)

UCSD freshmen tend to live a greater distance from home while attending college. 65% of UCSD freshmen report that the campus is at least 100 miles from their permanent home, compared with 54% of students from highly selective colleges. (p. 1)

Approximately 69% of UCSD freshmen report English as their native language compared with 88% of students from the entire CIRP public four-year college sample. (p.1)

Approximately 46% of UCSD freshmen estimate their parent's total income at or above \$75,000, while 57% of respondents from other highly selective colleges estimate incomes at or above that level. (p. 2)

A somewhat higher proportion of UCSD freshmen report their Mother's education level as high school graduate or below (27%) compared with other highly selective institutions (19%). A similar pattern is also found for father's educational level. (p. 2)

UCSD freshmen tend to come from less religious families than their counterparts from other colleges and universities, and this is reflected in their own self-reported religious preferences (p. 3) and behavior (p. 5), although approximately 15% of incoming UCSD freshmen consider themselves "born-again" Christians. This is similar to the findings from other public colleges in the CIRP sample. (p. 3)

Self Ratings and Assessment

UCSD freshmen tend to rate themselves similarly on several academic, cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral dimensions compared with other freshmen (p. 4).

Activities During the Senior Year in High School (p. 5)

Approximately one-half of incoming freshmen at UCSD and other highly selective colleges report being "frequently" bored in class.

More UCSD freshmen report tutoring other students compared to their counterparts from other highly selective public institutions (77% compared to 65%).

Incoming UCSD freshmen report lower levels of alcohol consumption than their counterparts at other colleges and universities for both wine and beer.

A higher proportion of incoming UCSD freshmen (83%) report frequently socializing with "someone of another racial or ethnic group" compared with freshmen at other highly selective public colleges (73%), and all public colleges (67%).

In general, UCSD students report engaging in community service at generally higher rates than their counterparts at other highly selective public colleges and all other public colleges in the CIRP sample. (e.g., Tutoring, teaching, environmental activities, hospital work, service to the homeless, and other community service) (p. 5). This is also confirmed on page 7 of the report with respect to Volunteer Work.

A lower proportion of UCSD freshmen report working during their senior year in high school (48%), compared with 66% of incoming freshmen at other highly selective public institutions. (p. 7)

Educational Aspirations and College Plans

UCSD freshmen tend to have higher educational aspirations than freshmen at other highly selective and all other public colleges and universities. Approximately 90% of UCSD freshmen intend to obtain a Master's degree or higher, compared with approximately 83% of respondents at highly selective colleges, and 77% of respondents at all public universities. (p. 9). When asked about the important reasons for attending college, preparation for graduate school is also cited by a higher proportion of UCSD freshmen compared with incoming freshmen and comparison institutions. (p. 9)

A lower proportion of UCSD freshmen indicated that UCSD was their "first choice" institution (48%) compared with freshmen at comparison institutions where approximately 68%-70% of respondents indicated that their current college was their first choice institution.

A possible corollary to the above finding on first choice colleges are data indicating UCSD freshmen tend to apply to colleges and universities at a substantially higher rate than freshmen at other public colleges and universities. For example, approximately 38% of UCSD freshmen report applying to at least seven colleges, compared with approximately 17% of freshmen at other highly selective institutions, and 11% for all freshmen nationwide.

UCSD students tend to show somewhat lower levels of academic confidence compared with freshmen at comparison institutions. Approximately 56% of incoming UCSD freshmen expect to make "at least a B average" compared with 63% of freshmen at comparable institutions, and 80% of students at all public colleges. This may be due to UCSD's reputation for high academic rigor (p. 19)

UCSD students indicate a somewhat higher propensity to engage in community service work, socialize with others from a different racial or ethnic grouping, participate in student clubs and participate in a study abroad program while in college than incoming freshmen from comparison institutions and all public colleges and universities (p. 17).

Social Views (p. 18)

Although a slightly higher proportion of UCSD students tend to report their political and social views as "far left" or "liberal," in general, their level of agreement with freshmen from highly selective institutions with various social and political issues facing the nation is similar.

Approximately 69% of UCSD freshmen agree that abortion should be legal (64% among highly selective colleges; 55% among all public colleges),

Thirty-eight percent believe the death penalty should be abolished (37% among highly selective colleges; 33% among all public colleges),

Seventeen percent agree that "racial discrimination is no longer a problem in America" (21% among highly selective colleges; 23% among all public colleges),

Approximately 63% agree that "wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now," (57% among highly selective colleges; 55% among all public colleges).

Approximately 70% agree that same-sex couples should "have the right to legal marital status." (64% among highly selective colleges; 57% among all public colleges).

60% of UCSD freshmen agreed with the statement: "Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished." (57% among highly selective colleges; 53% among all public colleges)

Approximately 19% of UCSD freshmen agreed that "Federal military spending should be increased." (31% among highly selective colleges; 33% among all public colleges)

Reasons for Attending UCSD (p. 10).

As in recent years, the strong academic reputation and national ranking of UCSD were two of the primary reasons for choosing this campus. A somewhat lower proportion of UCSD freshmen cited the "social activities" reputation of the campus, cost of attendance, and size of the university as very important reasons for choosing UCSD compared with freshmen at other highly selective colleges and in all public colleges.

Life Objectives and Values

A somewhat higher proportion of UCSD students expressed interest in "making a theoretical contribution to science," "developing a meaningful philosophy of life," "helping to promote racial understanding," "improving my understanding of other countries and cultures," and "working to find a cure for a health problem," compared with their counterparts at other highly selective public institutions and public colleges nationwide. (p. 11).

Probable Major and Career

Comparatively a somewhat higher proportion of UCSD freshmen indicate an interest in majoring in the biological sciences and economics (p. 13) and intend of pursuing medicine as a career (p. 14).

Anxiety over Financing College Expenses

New UCSD students tend to exhibit greater levels of anxiety with respect to financing their first year of college compared with freshmen at other public colleges and universities. A lower proportion of UCSD students expect to receive aid which does not need to be repaid (grants, scholarships, etc.) than students at other highly selective public institutions.

Approximately 75% of incoming freshmen express "some" or "major" concern about their ability to finance their college education compared with 62% of students from other highly selective public institutions. (p. 16).

Perhaps consistent with this concern over college finances, a higher proportion of UCSD freshmen (55%) expect to get a job at some point during college to help pay for expenses compared with 44% of freshmen from other highly selective colleges and universities. (p. 17)

UCSD Specific Questions

The biggest problem or concern anticipated by incoming UCSD freshmen remains "doing well academically" (56%), while 13% worry about financing college, 13% worry about making new friends and 10% are concerned about self-realization or trying to find personal meaning.

Consistent with anxiety over academic performance, approximately 46% of new freshmen anticipated needing help with "academic plans," and "study skills." Personal and family concerns were ranked relatively low on this list of possible problems (4%).

Approximately two-thirds of new freshmen indicated that it is important for the University to provide programs promoting greater ethnic and racial understanding.

With respect to contact with UCSD faculty, approximately 73% of UCSD freshmen believe it is either "essential" or "important" to establish a close relationship with a faculty member

As was found in another section of the survey and consistent with findings over the past decade, approximately two-thirds of incoming freshmen indicated that the strong academic reputation of the campus was the most important reason for choosing UCSD. Approximately 14% cited the social environment as the primary factor in choosing UCSD.

Information about the campus and the enrollment decision was based primarily on information gathered from the UCSD website (44%), followed by information provided by "students and friends in high school." (24%). Approximately 12% identified UCSD Admissions Officers, while approximately equal proportions identified high school guidance counselors and family members (10%).

With respect to activities that provided the most useful information about UCSD, approximately 32% indicated the UCSD website, 26% indicated a campus tour, 24% indicated Admit Day, while 14% indicated attendance at another UCSD event. Approximately 5% indicated reading a UCSD publication as being the most useful source of information about the campus.

The UCSD Admissions website was found to be the most useful source for campus and admissions information (56%). The General Catalog was cited by 15% of respondents as being the most helpful source of information while 4% indicated that the "Student Perspectives" brochure was the most helpful.

Approximately 32% of new freshmen intended to use a personal car during their first year at UCSD. Approximately 41% intend to use public transportation.

With respect to interpersonal and communication skills, approximately 57% of UCSD freshmen place themselves either above average or in the highest 10% compared with the average person their age.

Summary

Students are attracted to UCSD in large part due to the strong academic and research reputation of the campus. As UCSD continues to climb in national stature, admission to UCSD has become very competitive. The strong academic preparation profile in terms of grades and entrance test scores of incoming UCSD students in large part reflects the rising national standing and high selectivity of the University.

The data from the Freshman Survey indicate that new UCSD students are well prepared academically and have high educational and career aspirations; however they also exhibit a relatively high degree of anxiety over their anticipated academic performance. Although a high proportion report achieving very strong high school grades, a relatively high proportion also indicate frequently being bored in high school, and studying fewer hours when compared with responses received in prior administrations of the Freshman Survey.

UCSD is also challenged by the evidence that almost one-half of the survey respondents did not indicate the campus was their “first-choice” institution. This finding contrasts with the 1984 UCSD Freshman Survey results which indicated that approximately 80% of freshman respondents reported UCSD as their first-choice institution. As UCSD has grown in national rankings and stature, so too have applications for admission from increasingly well-prepared high school students, thus the selectivity of the institution has increased substantially over the last decade. In addition, policy changes for the University of California have also enabled application to all campuses of the University without additional charge. Thus there may be a greater institutional challenge for the campus to help ensure a positive college experience for those students who did not indicate that UCSD was their preferred choice, particularly those who were denied admission to their first-choice institution. However, UCSD respondents are similar to their counterparts at other highly selective institutions in that approximately equal proportions of freshmen respondents indicate that they “will be satisfied with your college.” Approximately 54% anticipate being satisfied with UCSD, compared with 57% at highly selective public four year colleges and 52% attending public colleges and universities. Data from the Your First College Year survey however also show that for prior entering cohorts of students, that approximately 70% are satisfied with their overall experience at UCSD during their first year, thus exceeding their stated expectations at the start of the freshman year.

There also appears to be increasing concern over the ability to finance college attendance, and more students are indicating the probable need to work to meet college expenses. This may have implications for this generation of students, particularly if the need to work increases the amount of time spent off-campus and engaged in non-academic pursuits and other forms of disengagement from the campus community.