

Comparative Perceptions of the Undergraduate Experience: Selected Findings from the 2006 University of California Undergraduate Experiences Survey (UCUES)

Background

In 2006, the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) participated in the fourth administration of the University of California Undergraduate Experiences Survey (UCUES). The UCUES is part of a major research effort in support of the Student Experience in the Research University in the 21st Century (SERU21) project. Established in summer 2001, SERU21 is based at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at UC Berkeley and is a collaborative project involving all the UC campuses. The first phase of SERU21 was jointly funded by the UC Office of the President and by campus student affairs divisions from each of UC's general undergraduate campuses. There are two primary objectives of the SERU21 Project:

- To develop new data that can assist policy development and improve the undergraduate experience, and
- To create a new resource to promote scholarly research and reflection in this field.

What is UCUES?

The University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) is an online survey that UCSD undergraduate students have been invited to complete during the spring quarter in 2002, 2004, 2004, and 2006. The survey was originally supported financially at UCSD by the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and logistically by the UCSD Office of Student Research and Information (SRI). The success and value of the UCUES prompted system-wide support by the UC Office of the President for the 2006 administration.

UCUES 2006 employed a modular design to allow for the inclusion of a greater number of items and a decrease in individual response time. The questionnaire contained a set of core questions administered to every respondent plus five unique modules of additional questions that were randomly assigned to subjects. The core questions focused primarily on topics related to academic program review but also covered student demographics, use of time, and general

satisfaction. The four common modules include Academic Engagement, Civic Engagement, Student Development, and Student Services. A fifth module allowed individual campuses to survey their students on issues of campus concern. The modular design resulted in over 700 items on the UC student experience.

Students were asked to evaluate many different aspects of campus life including student services, academic advising, campus climate, courses and instruction, and interaction with faculty.

UCUES provides information about student behavior including their use of time for working, studying, campus involvement, socializing, family; how they participate academically (i.e. how much course material they read, collaborative learning); self-ratings of academic and interpersonal skills; and involvement in community service.

The instrument also gathers extensive data on student attitudes such as their self-perceptions and goals, political beliefs and affiliation, and perceptions of the role of the research university. The UCUES also collects background information not available through other student data sources, particularly family immigration background and socioeconomic data.

For UCSD, the UCUES is a valuable resource. Information gathered through UCUES is used by campus departments and units to assess a variety of programs and services. These data are useful to inform our efforts to continually improve the undergraduate experience. As a UC system-wide survey, the UCUES provides a unique opportunity to compare the experiences of UCSD students to other UC campuses. The availability of comparative data provides our campus community with both normative and referential data that assist in the interpretation and applicability of our findings to the improvement of undergraduate life at UCSD.

The results from prior administrations of the UCUES are available from the “Surveys” section of the UCSD Student Research and Information website: <http://ugr8.ucsd.edu/>. This research brief focuses on comparative perceptions of campus climate and broad measures of satisfaction with the UCSD undergraduate experience with comparison data from other UC campuses.

Selected Findings

This summary provides selected climate and satisfaction comparison data for UCSD responses, and the norms for the UC campuses system on the same items. In general, the UCUES findings limited practical differences between UCSD and the UC groupings, however, there are some items where differences between UCSD and UC Norm comes close to or exceeds 10% either positively or negatively. This research brief references the tables that accompany report. Response rates were sufficiently high enough to merit the generalizability of the UCUES 2006 findings. Over 57,000 UC students completed a UCUES survey in 2006, and UCSD received almost 7,000 responses for the UCUES “core” survey, and approximately 1,200 responses for the individual UCUES modules.

Campus Climate (p. 1)

Campus climate was assessed using different items formats and prompts. UCUES 2006 employed several items that used a semantic differential to rate perceptions of campus climate (e.g., friendly to hostile, caring to impersonal using a six point scale (page 1). Inspection of the semantic differential items suggest that UCSD students generally perceive the campus as less “friendly” compared to the UC norm (12% for UCSD compared with 24% system-wide). UCSD is perceived as being a more “intellectual” campus compared with the system-wide norm (31% compared to 22%). Although other differences were found for selected campus climate items, these differences did not approximate or exceed the 10% criterion used in this research brief.

Inter-group relations (pp2-3)

In general, perceptions of the UCSD campus climate with respect to inter-group relations as measured by the “respect” accorded to students based on racial or ethnic grouping, gender, social class, and sexual orientation were similar to the UC norms. A similar pattern was found between UCSD student respondents and the overall UC norm with respect to the perceived campus climate for students holding diverse religious and political beliefs. The individual campus comparisons suggest some differences among the individual UC campuses compared to UCSD, however the differences were also of limited practical significance. Although not the focus of this research brief, analysis of these perceptions disaggregated by diverse student groupings may suggest significant differences in perceptions of campus climate and tolerance for diversity. Disaggregated responses by racial,

ethnic, and gender groupings are available for review in appendix D of the UCSD Student Affairs Strategic Plan. (Available upon request).

Academic and Social Satisfaction (pp. 3-4)

UCSD respondents tended to rate satisfaction with the “overall academic experience” similarly to the general UC student population. However UCSD students were somewhat less satisfied with their UC GPA compared with students from other campuses. This finding tends to corroborate the finding that UCSD students tended to view the campus as “highly intellectual” and academically challenging. Prior research conducted by SRI has suggested a significant relationship between academic success and other measures of satisfaction with campus life. Although not the focus of this report, students who report or demonstrate higher levels of academic performance tend to be more satisfied with other measures of satisfaction with campus life.

In general, UCSD students rated their satisfaction with the “overall social experience” lower than the UC norms, although the differences were within 10% of the UC norm. When disaggregated by UC campus, differences of 10% or above were found with respect to the social experience indicator. The relative dissatisfaction of UCSD students with the “social experience” at UCSD compared to other UC campuses has been noted in prior UCUES reports and has followed the same general pattern of responses.

Perceptions of Overall Experience at UC (p. 4)

Although the UCUES included several domains and indicators of the campus experiences, for the purpose of brevity, two indicators of overall satisfaction were selected. One item measured the respondent’s “sense of belonging” or affiliation with UCSD. The second item asked if the student would choose to enroll at UCSD if he or she had to make the decision again. These data suggest that UCSD respondents tended to feel lower levels of affiliation and general satisfaction with their experiences compared with the UC norms. Although the relative satisfaction ratings were within 10% of the overall UC norms, comparisons with individual campuses suggest significant differences on these two general indicators of affiliation and satisfaction. As noted earlier in this report, although the level of satisfaction with the overall academic experience at UC is approximately the same for UCSD and the UC norm group, UCSD students indicate to be less satisfied with their overall social experience and general sense of belonging. These findings will be explored in greater detail to attempt to identify

areas that contribute to lower satisfaction levels with the UCSD “social” experience. The mean scores of the scales were converted into numeric values (1-6) for the items analyzed in this report and are displayed on page 4. The mean scores tend to confirm the patterns found in the cross-tabulation tables included in this report.