

Fall 2006 New Student Survey New Freshman Respondents

For the second year, a new student survey was administered to entering freshmen and transfers in UC Merced's fall semester. This report briefly summarizes the results for the freshman respondents in Fall 2006, with comparisons to the campus' inaugural class in Fall 2005. Because the recruiting result¹ for these two classes was very different, it is important for the campus to try to understand as much as possible about what factors influence students to enroll and how these factors might change over time. Were the first year's students, the pioneering class, different from the second in important ways? Obviously, the chance to be in a pioneering class happens only once.

Purpose of Survey

The purpose of the new student survey is to obtain feedback from these students regarding the reasons they chose UC Merced, their levels of satisfaction with various campus facilities and services, as well as the academic and social aspects of their experiences, their self-evaluation of their skills (academic, general college adjustment, life management, social and cultural, and computer use), how they tend to use their time, and whether or not they plan to take summer courses (at UC Merced or elsewhere).

The Respondents

All 398 new freshmen in Fall 2006 were invited to complete the survey in early December 2006. Reminders were emailed to non-respondents periodically through December 15th, then again (after the semester break) from January 16th to 23rd, 2007. The response rate for the Fall 2006 freshmen (38%) was substantially lower than that for the Fall 2005 freshmen (51%), perhaps because of differences in the timing of the survey for the two years. The 2005 survey started in November and ended before final exams in December, whereas the 2006 survey started in December and did not end until mid-January. The two classes differed in other ways, as well. Whereas the Fall 2005 class had a slightly higher percentage of females than males (51% vs. 49%), the reverse was true for the Fall 2006 class (45% vs. 55%) (Table 1). Furthermore, while the response rates for males was lower than for females in both classes, it was much lower for the Fall 2006 class (29% vs. 47%).

The Fall 2006 class had a larger proportion of Hispanic students than the Fall 2005 class (29% vs. 25%) and smaller proportions of Asian and White. Compared to the 2005 class, the 2006 class also tended to have higher percentages of students from the San Joaquin Valley (36% vs. 28%) and lower proportion from Southern California (25% vs. 34%). This somewhat greater concentration of students from the Valley probably explains the greater percentage of first-generation students in the Fall 2006 class than earlier (49% vs. 40%).

¹ The yield rate (enroll/admit) for the first class was almost double that for the second year, even though the numbers of applications and admits were very similar. This was the case despite the fact that the campus was much less developed for the first-year recruiting period than for the second: buildings and landscaping were unfinished, choices of majors much fewer, and co-curricular programming less available. The admit rates for some of the other UC campuses was higher in the second year, which changed the set of options for those students who might have had different admit decisions had they applied a year earlier.

For the first-year students, nine programs were available for them to declare as majors. By Fall 2006, a total of 14 programs were available. The distribution of freshman majors among the Schools changed somewhat. Natural Sciences still enrolled the largest proportion of new freshmen in 2006 (30%) but the proportion declined from 34% in 2005. The percentage of freshmen who were Engineering majors increased from 16% to 24% from 2005 to 2006, while the percentage who were Social Sciences, Humanities & Arts (SSHA) majors declined substantially, from 33% in 2005 to 23% in 2006. The response rates for freshmen in all the Schools dropped considerably compared to the Fall 2005 class, but especially so for those in Engineering (from 54% to 29%). All these differences combined (recruiting factors, timing of survey, response rates, gender and ethnic composition, geographic distribution, availability of majors) suggest that we would find differences in the survey responses from the first- to second-year freshman classes.

Was UC Merced Their First Choice?

The Fall 2006 freshmen were slightly less likely than the Fall 2005 freshmen to have considered UC Merced as their first-choice college (Table 2; 20% vs. 24%). They were more likely than the inaugural class to indicate that UC Merced was their third or lesser choice (60% vs. 57%). Freshmen who responded that UC Merced was not their first choice tended to indicate another UC campus as their first choice, especially UC Davis.

Reasons for Attending

The most important reasons for the Fall 2006 freshmen to attend UC Merced tended to be associated with the smallness of the campus (Table 3A). Almost unanimously, they said that the opportunity to work closely with faculty and the personal attention from faculty and staff were somewhat or very important in their decision to come to UC Merced. About 80% said that the small size of the campus and the friendliness or helpfulness of faculty and staff they've met were important in their decision. UC Merced's newness (79%) and wanting to be in one of the first classes (61%) were still factors in choosing to enroll at this campus, but not as dominating in importance as they were for the Fall 2005 inaugural class. Clearly, the students in that first year were highly motivated to come to UC Merced to be pioneers at a brand new research university. It is unknown, however, how much the size of the campus factored into their decision-making, as these questions had not been included in the Fall 2005 survey.

The two freshman classes were equally (and highly) likely to have been influenced by the reputation of the campus and the UC system (over 80% having responded that this was important or very important; however, the Fall 2006 class was more likely than the Fall 2005 class to have indicated that the quality of their intended major was an important or very important reason for attending UC Merced (72% vs. 64%). This may have been affected by the increased number of majors offered in year two than in year one (although there was a higher percentage of 2006 respondents who were undeclared than there were in 2005 --- 22% vs. 14%), or perhaps by the general publicity surrounding the inaugural year.

Relatives, teachers, and high school guidance counselors seemed to have influenced the two classes similarly. Compared to other factors, these tended not to be as important in their determination to come to Merced. Financial aid, although also not a dominating factor, tended to be more important to the Fall 2006 class than to the Fall 2005 class. Wanting to live near home seemed also to factor similarly for the two classes (45% in 2006 versus 42% in 2005 said wanting to be near home was somewhat or very important). Not surprisingly, for those students from the San Joaquin Valley, 47% in 2006 said that being near home was a very important reason for attending UC Merced (44% in 2005) (Table 3B).

Satisfaction with Facilities and Services

The campus experience for the Fall 2005 class was very different from that for the Fall 2006 class, and it shows in terms of their satisfaction with key facilities and services. In Fall 2005, classes were held in the Library because the Classroom Building was not finished in time for the opening semester. The Science and Engineering Building (also designed to hold classrooms and teaching labs) was not ready until Spring 2006, and then only partially. Instead of being bused to an off-campus location (at the old Castle air force base in Atwater) to attend lab classes, starting in Spring 2006 the students could attend their lab classes in the Science and Engineering Building. The regular classrooms in this building were not ready until Fall 2006. Many teaching labs and computer facilities were not operational or available until the campus' second year. Not surprisingly, therefore, the level of satisfaction with classroom and facilities, as well as library facilities and services (which were impacted by the need to accommodate classes in spaces meant for other uses), differed substantially for the two classes. Over 60% of the Fall 2006 class, compared to under 50% of the Fall 2005 class (under 30% for classroom facilities), were very satisfied with the classroom and computer facilities (Table 4). Over 70%, compared to 49% of the Fall 2005 class, were very satisfied with the library facilities and services.

Recreational programs and services is another area where availability differed substantially between the two years (42% very satisfied in 2006 vs. 30% in 2005). The Gallo Recreation and Wellness Center did not open until November, 2006. Club sports also were not an option until the second year. Since recreational programs are supported largely by student fees, growth in this area will necessarily be gradual and dependent on the annual enrollment growth rates for the campus. Clearly, the difference in the readiness of the campus in these two years had an impact on the students' levels of satisfaction in these areas.

Satisfaction with Classes/Academics

Only about a third of both classes were very satisfied with their class schedule (days/times) and the availability of courses they need. About two-thirds of both classes were very satisfied with their access to small classes. This is good in that it reinforces the fact that the small size of the campus for them (at least for the Fall 2006 class) was an important reason for them to attend UC Merced in the first place. There seemed to be some improvement in the level of satisfaction with the frequency and quality of feedback

from professors from the first year to the second (41% vs. 59% indicating they were very satisfied). In fact, this also is true for other academic experiences (amount of contact with faculty, relevance of coursework to everyday life and also to future career plans), and for the level of satisfaction with the quality of instruction overall (33% of Fall 2005 freshmen very satisfied vs. 56% of Fall 2006 freshmen).

Satisfaction with Social Life

Fall 2006 freshmen, compared to Fall 2005 freshmen, were about 2 ½ times more likely to be very satisfied with campus-organized social and service activities (31% vs. 12%). They were about 1 ½ times more likely to be very satisfied with the overall sense of community among students (46% vs. 25%). Like recreational programs, the student life-activities on campus depend on student fees. Growth in the number and selection of activities, clubs, and student organizations will be gradual, as enrollments increase.

Levels of satisfaction with their opportunities to make new friends and explore the community were comparable for both freshman classes. The fact that a large majority of both freshman classes lived in campus student housing probably contributed, at least in part, to the “stability” of satisfaction levels in these areas; their living experiences were pretty much the same.

Satisfaction with Overall College Experience

Not surprisingly, when evaluating their overall college experience --- facilities, services, academics, and social life --- the Fall 2006 freshmen tended to be more satisfied than the Fall 2005 class. This most likely was due to, what the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs frequently says, “there’s more there there.” More buildings were finished, more facilities open, and more recreational and social life programming available. At the same time, the campus, and more importantly class sizes, remained relatively small, reinforcing the tendency for personal attention (from faculty and staff).

Self-Evaluation of Skills

Both classes of new freshmen were asked to rate themselves (above average, average, or below average) on skills in a variety of areas: academics, general college adjustment, life management, social and cultural, and computer. In every category and for every skill within each category, the Fall 2006 class rated themselves similarly, or a little higher, than their Fall 2005 counterparts (Table 5). Except for one skill area (getting to know faculty) for the Fall 2005 cohort, over 80% (and frequently over 90%) of both classes rated themselves as average or above average. In three areas, over half of both classes rated themselves as above average: adjusting to being away from home/family, understanding diverse viewpoints, and using basic computer applications. What is unknown, unfortunately, is the reference group for their ratings: their college classmates, their high school classmates, or some other reference group?

The 2006 respondents had a slightly higher high school GPA, on average, than the 2005 respondents (3.488 vs. 3.445), but the SAT scores, on average, were somewhat lower (1040 vs. 1076) (Table 6). The SAT test was revised between the time the 2005 and 2006 classes took the test and, nationwide, the average scores for the 2006 test-takers

tended to be lower than those for previous years. The two classes were fairly similar in terms of academic preparation before coming to UC Merced (number of A-G courses² taken and percentage (over three-quarters) having taken at least one honors course in high school), as well as in terms of the academic quality of the high school from which they graduated (as measured by the high school's Academic Performance Index, or API).

Hours Spent During Typical Week in Various Activities

How the new freshmen each year spent their time was remarkably similar (Table 7). On average, the Fall 2006 class spent slightly more time during a typical week socializing with friends informally off campus (6 vs. 5 hours), participating in campus-oriented activities (4 vs. 3 hours) and student clubs and groups (3 vs. 2 hours), exercising or participating in sports (5 vs. 4 hours), watching TV (5 vs. 4 hours), reading for pleasure (5 vs. 4 hours), and praying/meditating (3 hours vs. 2 hours). They were much more likely than the Fall 2005 class, on average, to spend time surfing the internet for fun, non-course-related activities (10 vs. 7 hours), and somewhat more likely to spend time communicating with others via e-mail, Instant Messenger, etc. (8 vs. 7 hours). The inaugural class spent an average of 1 hour a week more than the Fall 2006 cohort attending their classes, labs, and other scheduled academic work time (16 vs. 15 hours per week).

Academic/Career Plans

Over 50% of the Fall 2006 freshman class felt that there was a somewhat or very good chance that they would change their major field and/or their career goal over the course of their college experience (Table 8). Their Fall 2005 counterparts were even more likely to say they would change, especially in terms of their career goal (62% vs. 53%). The two classes responded about equally that they would likely transfer to another college before graduating; however, proportionately more of the Fall 2006 class than the Fall 2005 class thought there would be a very good chance that they would transfer (22% vs. 13%).

Almost three-quarters of the Fall 2006 freshmen said that there is a somewhat or very good chance that they will participate in research activities with a faculty member. (This question was not included in the Fall 2005 survey.) This reinforces the fact that about three-quarters of these freshmen had also said that the opportunity to be involved in research projects was important in their decision to attend UC Merced in the first place. Of the 35 who said there is a very good chance that they will participate in research activities, 94% had indicated that the opportunity to be involved in research projects was a very important reason for their coming to UC Merced. Almost two-thirds of the class said that they felt they had a somewhat or very good chance to be satisfied with their first semester GPA (no comparative data available for the Fall 2005 class). Of those who

² A-G courses are the subject area requirements for entry into the UC system. Undergraduates must complete, with grades of C or better, 15 units of high school course work in the following areas: A. History/Social Science: 2 years required; B. English: 2 years; C. Mathematics: 3 years; D. Lab Science: 2 years; E. Language other than English: 2 years; F. Visual & Performing Arts: 1 year; and G. College-Prep Elective: 12 year. Additional information about these requirements can be found on the application or in the UCM Catalog.

indicated that they thought they had a somewhat or very good chance of being satisfied, 50% earned a first-semester GPA of 3.0 or higher, 89% earned a GPA of 2.0 or higher. Conversely, 50% of those who had indicated they thought they had very little or no chance of being satisfied received a GPA under 2.0 for their first semester; 82% received a GPA under 3.0. Most of the students, at the point when they responded to this survey (which was after the distribution of mid-term grades), were realistic about their potential for academic success.

Degree Plans

Over 70% of the 2006 freshman respondents indicated that the highest degree they planned to obtain from UC Merced is the bachelor's degree (Table 9). This compares to 65% of the 2005 class. This item, however, was modified somewhat for the 2006 survey to get a finer breakdown of the types of degrees the students might plan to pursue. Only about 28% of the survey respondents in 2005 answered this question, whereas 60% of the 2006 respondents answered. Because of this and the modification of the question, we caution against trying to make any meaningful comparisons between the two years.

One in six of the 2006 respondents plan to earn a higher degree at UC Merced, mostly at the master's level (either an MBA or other master's degree). Over 70% indicated that they plan to obtain their highest degree elsewhere: 26% master's; 25% MDs; 11% non-medical doctorates.

Summer Courses

In an attempt to help plan for summer course offerings, the survey asked whether or not these students thought they might take summer courses at Merced or elsewhere. Near the end of their first semester at UC Merced, almost 30% of the inaugural class indicated that they were planning to take summer courses; however, only 13% of them indicated that they would do this at UC Merced (Table 10). Most (51%) planned to attend a community college for summer coursework. Although the Fall 2006 was more likely than their Fall 2005 counterparts to say they planned to take summer courses (65%), like their counterparts, only 13% of them indicated they would attend UC Merced's summer session; most planned to attend a community college for their coursework (57%).

The Fall 2006 freshmen and transfers suggested a whole range of courses that they would be interested in taking during the summer, including various Arts and History courses, Languages and Literature, Biology, Chemistry, Math/Calculus, Computer Science, Physics, Social Sciences (Economics, Psychology), Writing, and courses that would satisfy General Education requirements (Table 11).

Conclusion

The recruiting environment as well as the first-semester experience was very different for the inaugural and second-year freshman classes. Although it may be several years before this start-up campus is more established in terms of its visibility and reputation within the State and UC System, and perhaps even more years before the student experience includes the array of facilities and social and cultural programming

offered at other four-year institutions, it is important for the campus to continue to obtain feedback from students regarding their reasons for matriculating at UC Merced and their experiences both in and outside the classroom. Surveys such as this new-student survey along with information from other sources (e.g., advisors, student demographics, success indicators) are crucial to help the campus improve both the academic and co-curricular aspects of the students' experiences.