

April 2022

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This report examines the self-reported reasons why students chose whether to attend UC Merced, though examination of survey responses after students file (or decline to file) a Statement of Intent to Register (SIR). We examined the relationship between survey responses and applicant characteristics, specifically gender, race/underrepresented minority status, and school of intended major, with the intention of informing targeting marketing campaigns to increase overall SIR yields.

Background

The Office of Undergraduate Admissions conducts an “SIR-Yes” survey each year, inviting students who submit an SIR to UC Merced, while “SIR-No” surveys are given to students who decline their admissions offer. In this analysis, we focused on admitted applicants in the Fall admissions cycles from 2016 through 2021.

This analysis was designed to investigate two main questions 1) What were the most common items identified by students who submitted SIRs, and those who did not? 2) How did response patterns differ across student characteristics?

Note that we have limited local control over the SIR No survey, and because of this, we administer separate surveys to the two groups (we also are limited in what we can change or remove on the SIR No survey).

SIR Rates and Responses

Table 1. Response Counts by Year

	SIR No	SIR Yes
2016	1614 (11%)	770 (27%)
2017	1599 (11%)	883 (26%)
2018	1774 (11%)	765 (25%)
2019	2248 (13%)	730 (24%)
2020	3326* (16%)	893 (27%)
2021	3256* (14%)	919*(24%)

*revised

Response rates for the SIR Yes survey have been consistently between 24 and 27% per year. Rates for the SIR No survey (calculated with the number of applicants who never submitted an SIR as the denominator) have been consistently lower, from 11 – 16% per year.

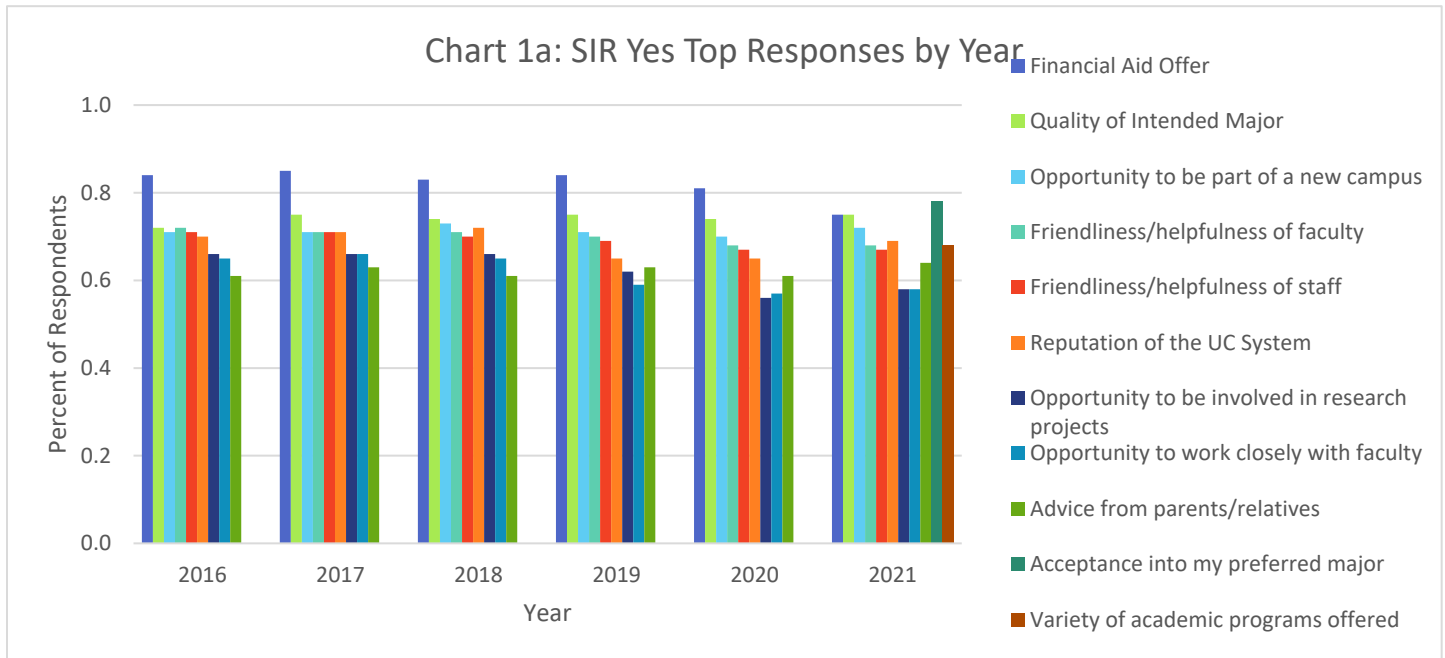
All students – SIR Yes survey: In this analysis, we examined question 1, which asks students “How important to you were each of the following reasons for submitting a Statement of Intent to Register? (Choose one option for each item)”. Students were asked to choose one of the following options for each item: Very Important, Somewhat Important, and Not Important. Three main

factors were consistently rated across the years as being Very Important to the decision to SIR- Financial Aid, Quality of Intended Major, and the Opportunity to be part of a new campus, As shown in Chart 1a on the following page. Financial Aid is the #1 factor across years, with over 80% rating it as Very Important. Additional key factors have been the Friendliness/helpfulness of Faculty, the Friendliness/helpfulness of Staff, and the Reputation of the UC System. Two factors that in the past were more important but have since declined in prominence are the Opportunity to work closely with Faculty and the Opportunity to be involved in research projects.

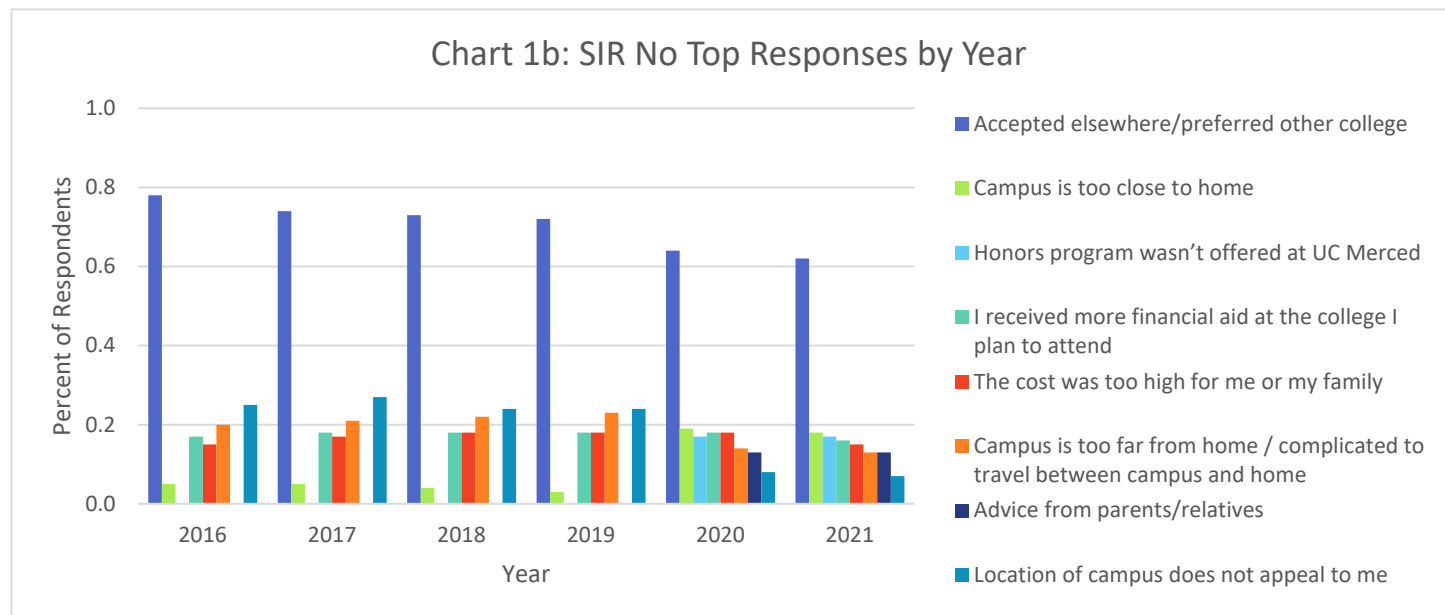
The survey was revised for 2021, which included new options; the top factor in 2021 was Acceptance into Preferred Major (78%), followed by Quality of Intended Major (75%), Financial Aid Offer (75%), Opportunity to be part of a new campus (72%), Reputation of the UC system (69%) and Friendliness/helpfulness of faculty (68%). Trends over time were similar across breakouts, so we focus on

Trends in Applicant SIR Surveys, 2016-2021

the 2020 SIR Yes results when comparing groups in the following pages. (Note we did not focus on 2021 results in the comparison analyses as we were unable to link the 2021 responses with student demographic data).



All students – SIR No survey: In this analysis, we examined question 6, ‘I am not enrolling at UC Merced because: (check all that apply)’. The most prominent reason across time for not submitting the SIR has been *choosing to attend another institution*, though this has been declining over the years, from 78% in 2016 to 62% in 2021. The second main factor has been *location*; from 2016-2019, the second most common reason was that “*The location of campus does not appeal to me*” – though this item has decreased in prominence,

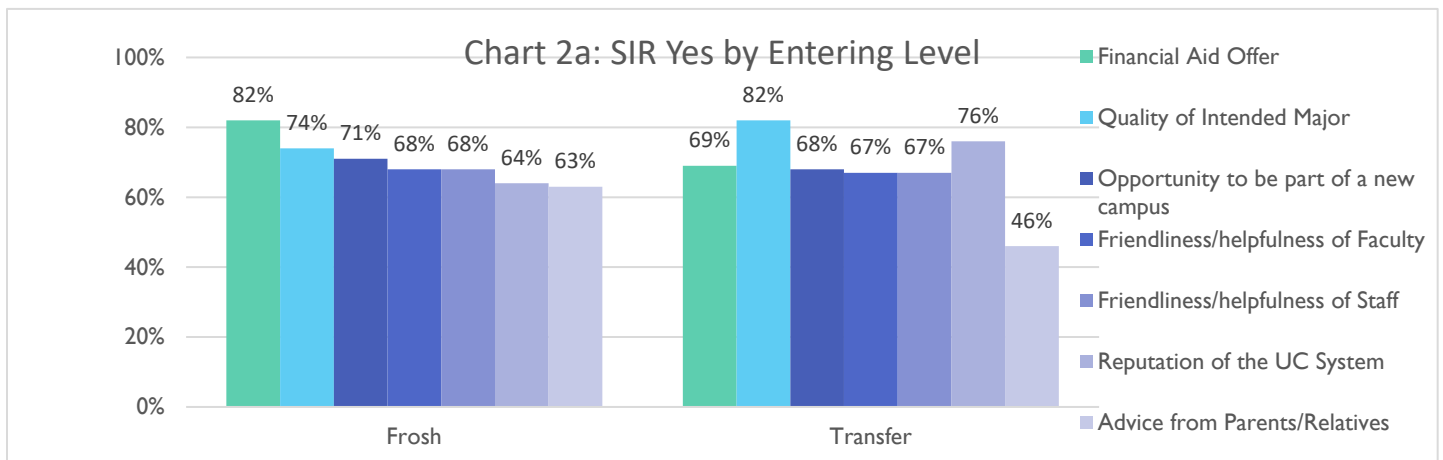


Trends in Applicant SIR Surveys, 2016-2021

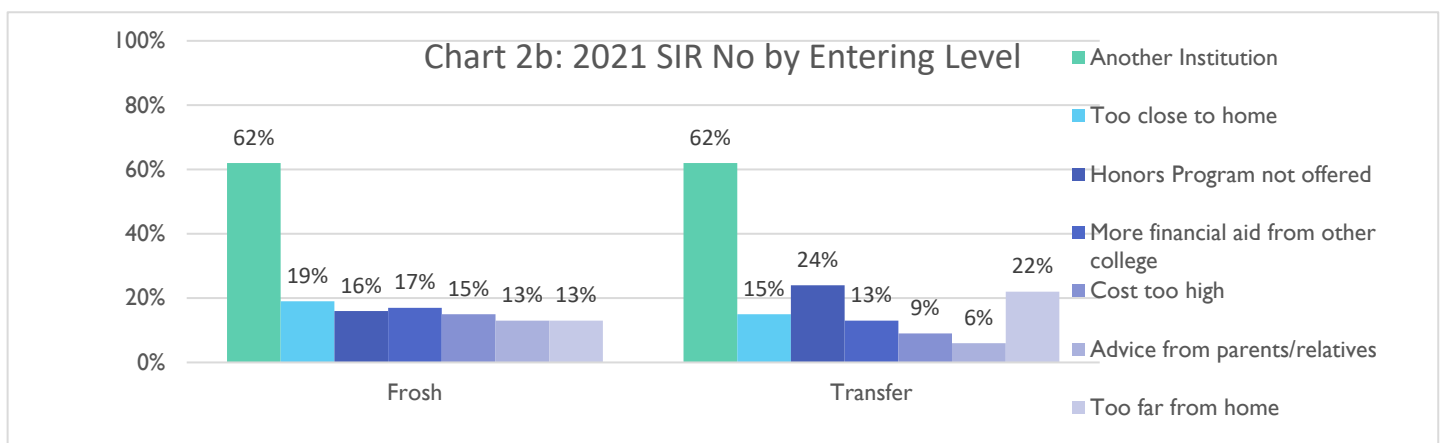
from 25% in 2016, to 7% in 2021; in 2020 and 2021 this item was unseated by “*Campus is too close to home*”, which has increased from 5% in 2016 to 18% in 2021. The next most prominent item is one that was added to the survey in 2020- “*Honors program wasn’t offered at UC Merced*”, with 17% providing this response. The 4th and 5th most common responses concern costs – “*I received more financial aid from the college I plan to attend*”, consistently getting 17-18% of students responding, and “*The cost was too high for me or my family*”, ranging from 15-18% of students. The 6th reason was “*Advice from Parents/Relatives*” which was added to the survey in 2020, with 13% of students providing this answer. See Chart 1b, on the previous page, for more details.

Trends over time were similar across breakouts, so we focus on the 2021 SIR No results when comparing groups in the following pages.

Entering Level – SIR Yes: Top responses were similar, with the main distinction being the top 2 responses; Frosh cited their Financial Aid offer as the #1 reason, followed by the Quality of the intended major, while Transfer students cited the Quality of the Intended Major as the top reason, followed by the Reputation of the UC System, see Chart 2a:

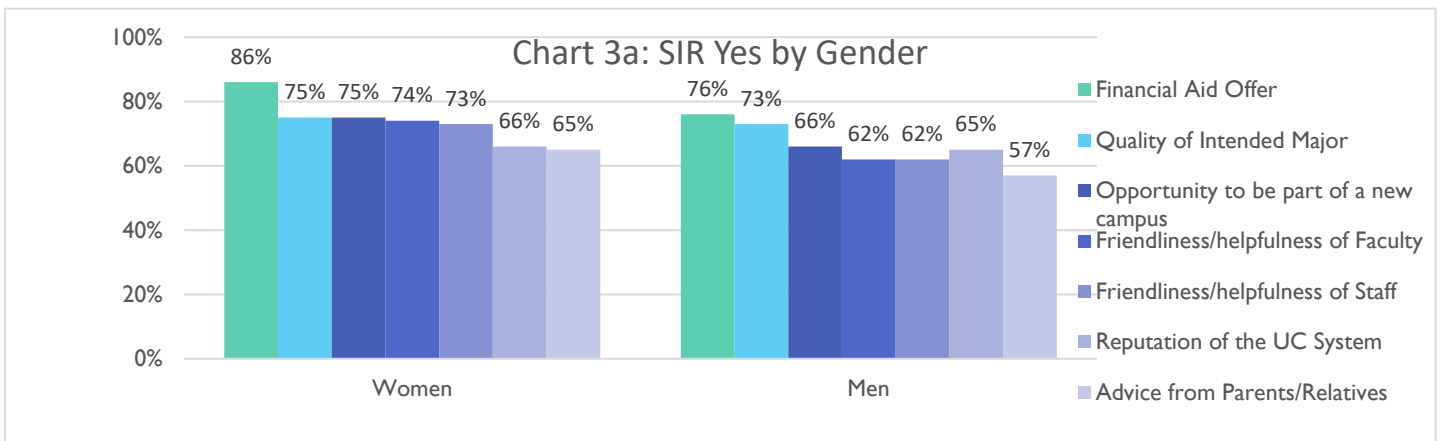


Entering Level – SIR No: Top responses were similar by entering level, with both Frosh and Transfer students having the same top reasons for not attending, though the patterns differed; Transfers were more concerned with the lack of Honors programs, and distance from home, while Frosh gave more consideration to the advice from parents and relatives, see Chart 2b, below:

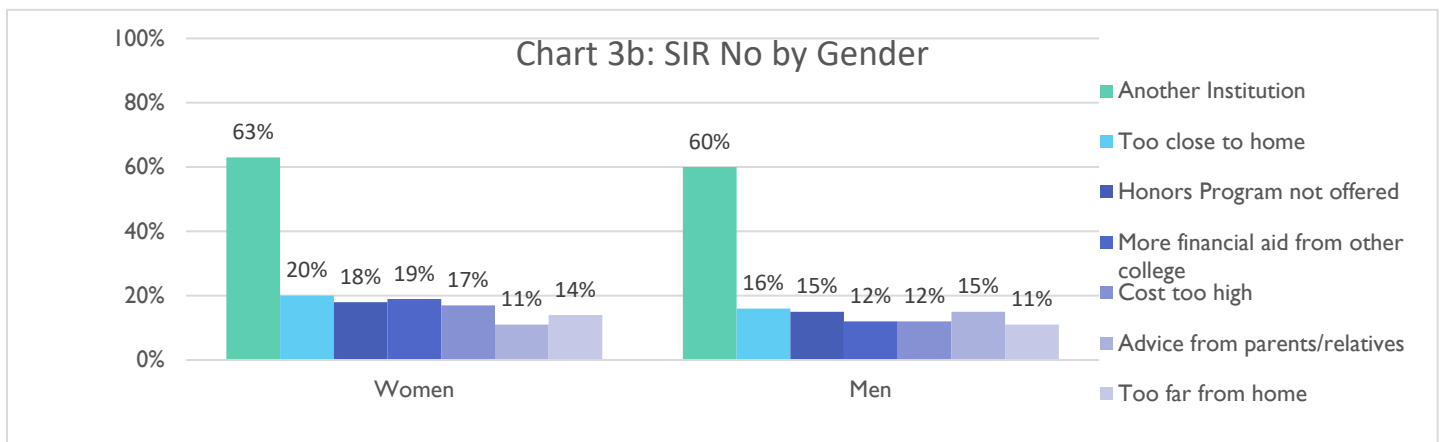


Taken together, it appears that Frosh are somewhat more influenced by parents/relatives and financial aid, while Transfers place a higher priority on academic quality, honors programs, and being closer to home.

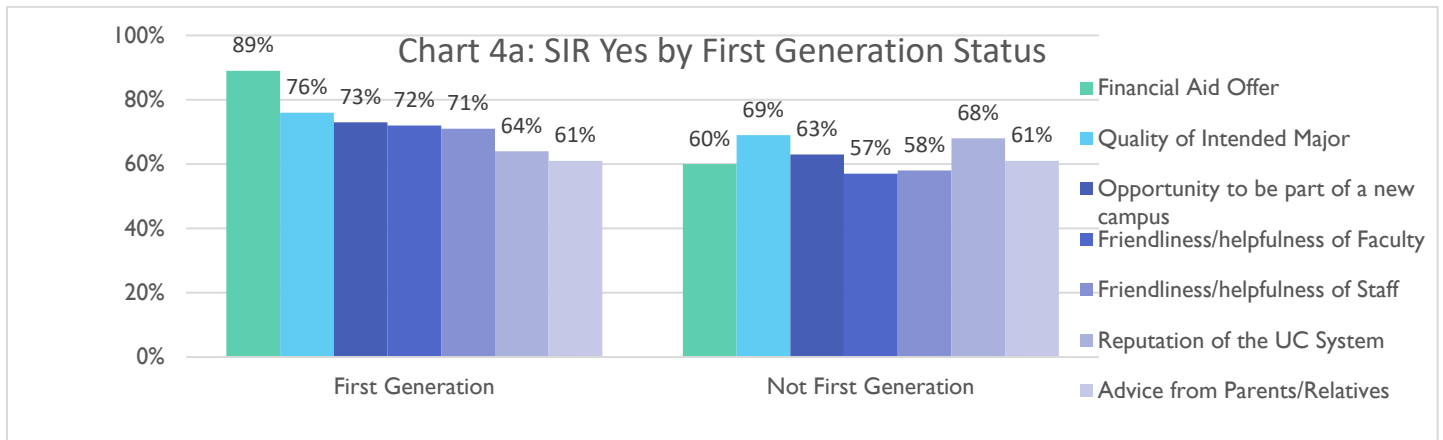
Gender – SIR Yes: Similar reasons were given by both Men and Women, though Women were more concerned with most items, see Chart 3a:



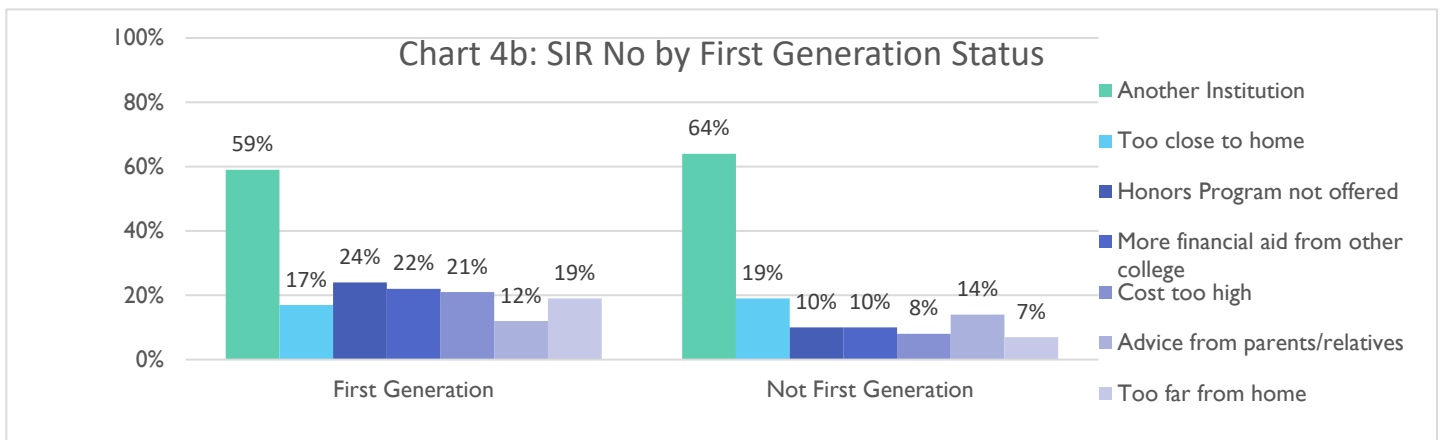
Gender – SIR No: The same set of top responses were present, though again, with different rates for Men and Women, with women more concerned with all items, except for *Advice from Parents/Relatives*, which influenced more men, and was tied for the third most important item for that group, see Chart 3b:



First Generation Status – SIR Yes: The same set of items were rated as important, though with different rates for First Generation and Non – First Generation students; the First Generation students were more concerned with Financial aid, while their Non – First Generation peers rated Quality of Intended Major as the most important factor, see Chart 4a:

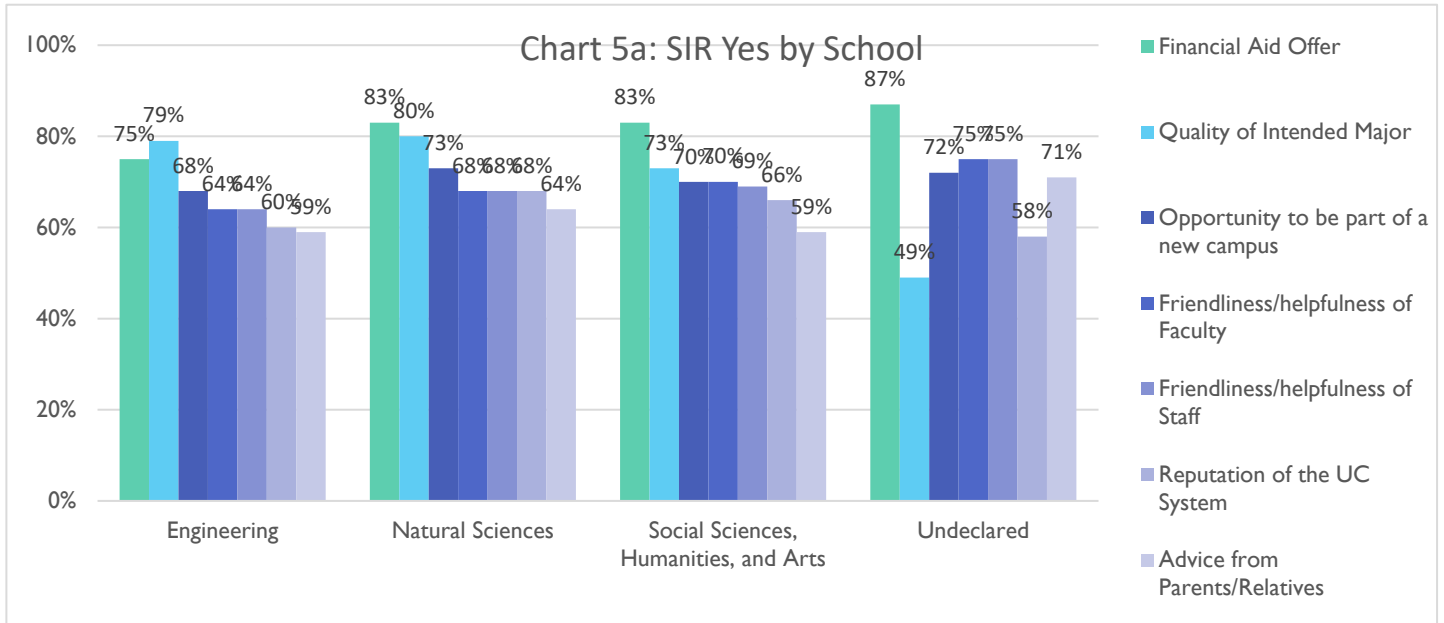


First Generation Status – SIR No: The same top reasons were identified, and we can see clear differences between the two groups, with the lack of an Honors program, Financial aid, Costs, and distance from home being more important to First Generation Students, with the lack of an Honors program being the second most important item for this group. In comparison, the Not First Generation group was more concerned with being too close to home, as well as advice from parents and relatives; see chart 4:

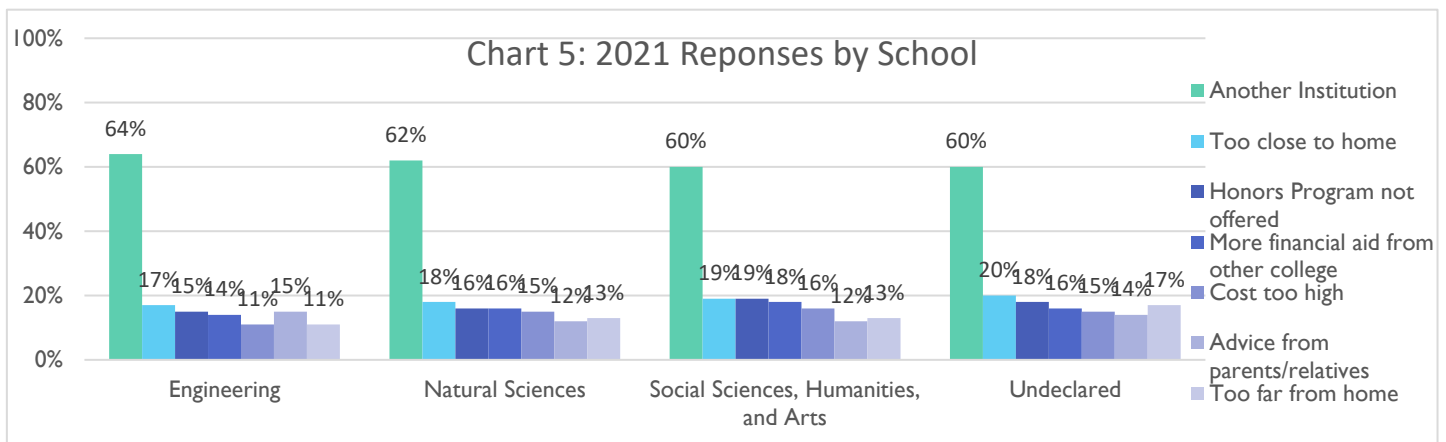


Trends in Applicant SIR Surveys, 2016-2021

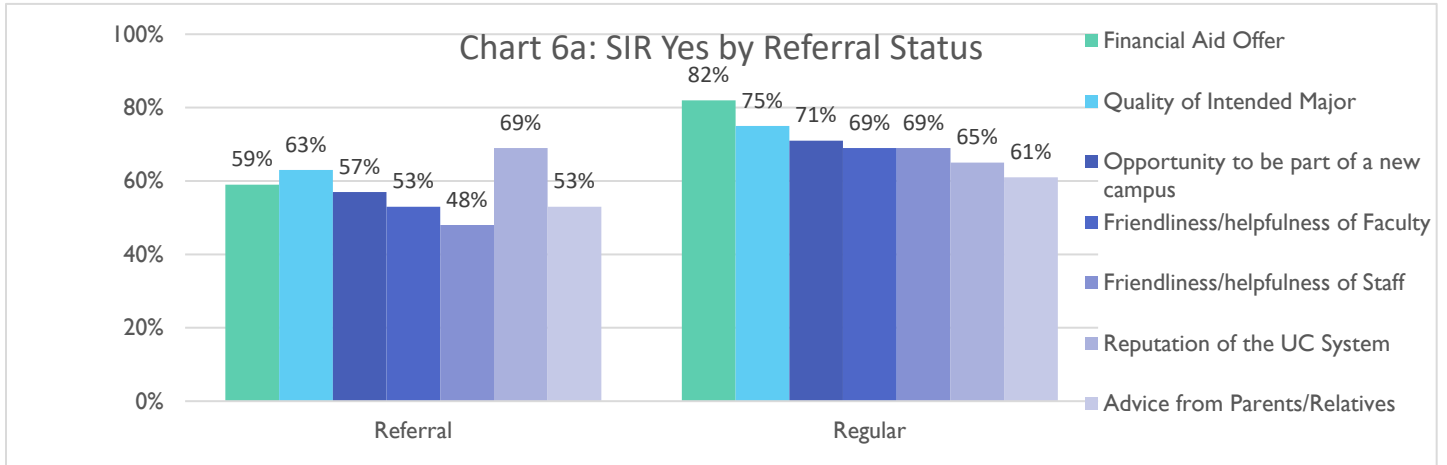
School – SIR Yes: Similar top reasons were given across School of intended major, with a few differences; Engineering students rated Financial Aid somewhat less often than other students, while Undeclared students rated Quality of Intended Major and Reputation of the UC System much lower. Additionally, Undeclared students had the Advice of High School Teachers and Counselors as their 6th item (64% rated it as Very Important), and Natural Sciences students had Research Projects as their 4th item (68% rated it as Very Important). See Chart 5a for details:



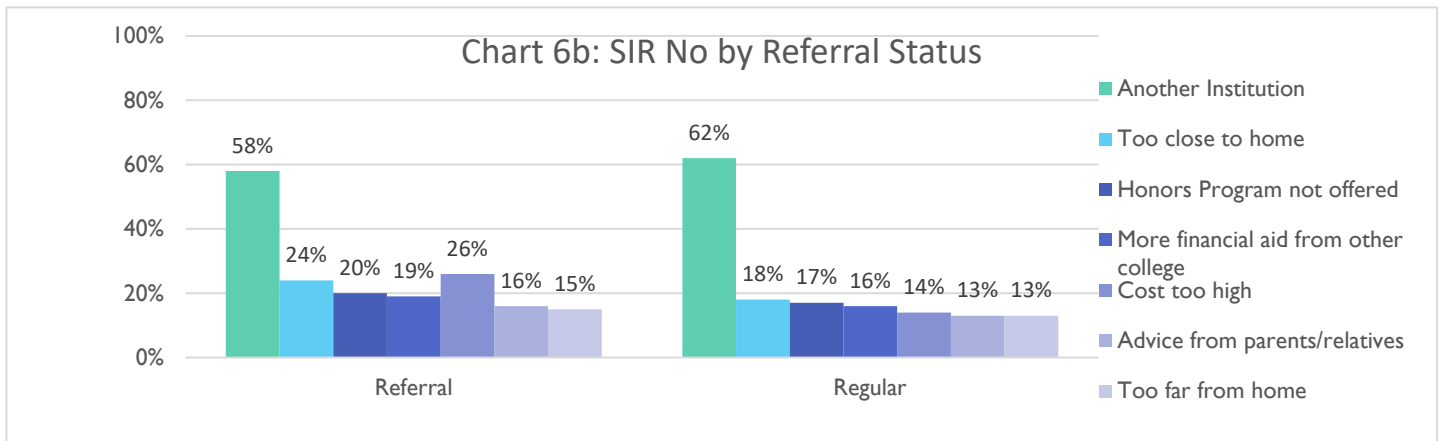
School – SIR No: The same top reasons were observed across School of intended major, with consistency in the rates, and order, though students with an intended major in Engineering more often selected *Advice from parents/relatives* (15%) than the others, and Undeclared students were more concerned with being too far from home than other students, see Chart 5, on the following page.



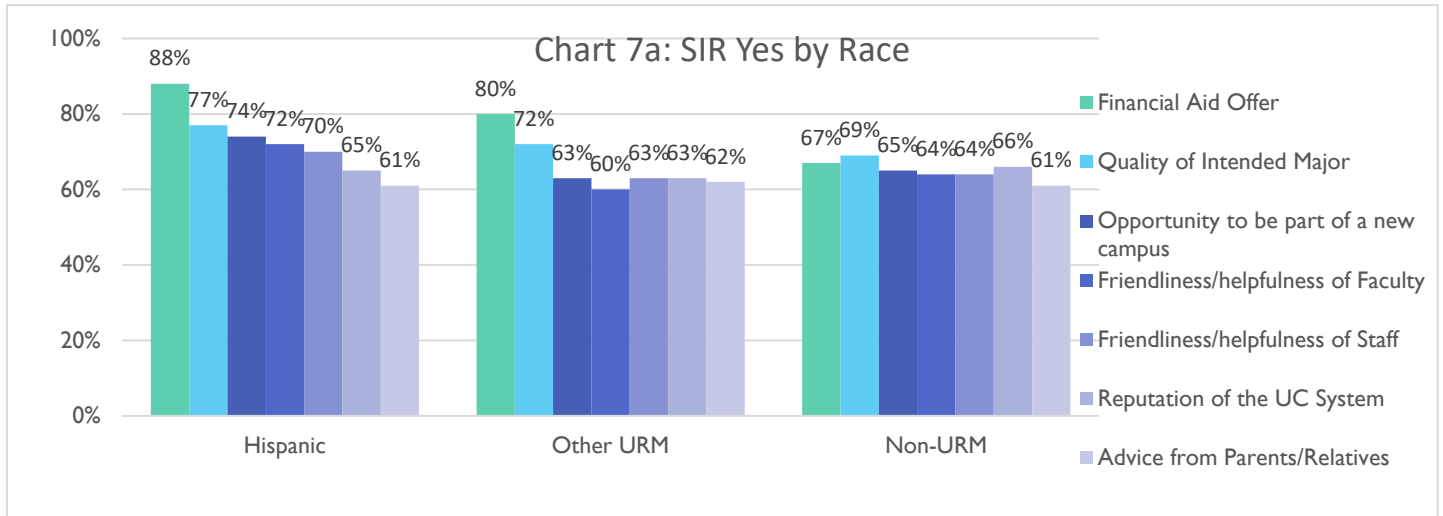
Referral Status – SIR Yes: Key differences between Referral pool and regular applicants were seen, with Referral students more rating Reputation of the UC System as the most important reason, with less importance given across all other categories, see Chart 6a:



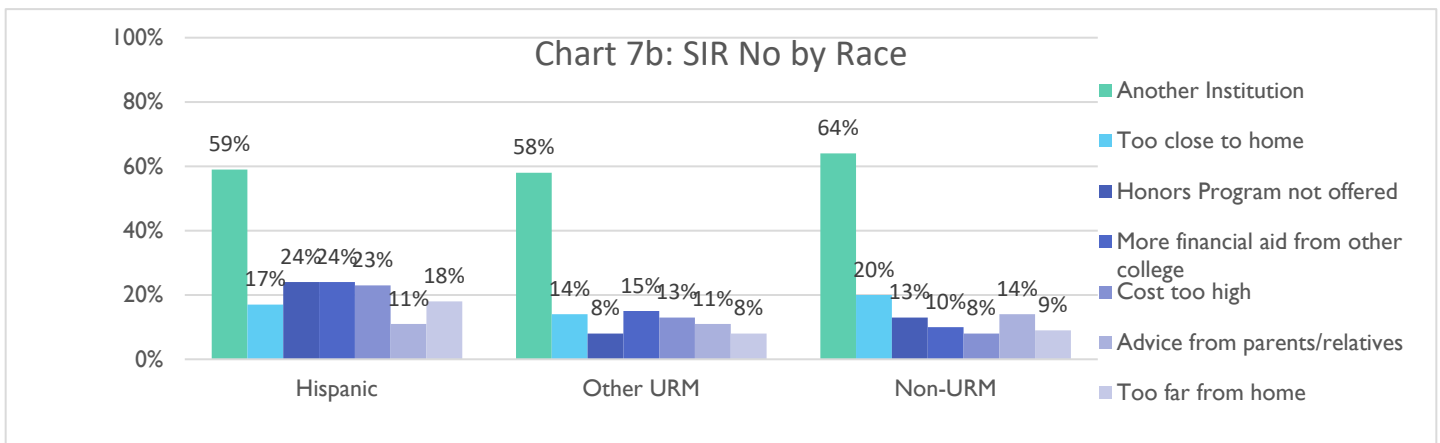
Referral Status – SIR No: Differences between students from the Referral pool and regular applicants were observed, with Referral students more concerned with all categories, particularly with the Cost being too high (their second most important reason), see Chart 6:



Race – SIR Yes: We examined results by race/ethnicity, and chose to compare three categories, based on similarity of responses- Non-Underrepresented Minorities (including Asian, White, and Unknown), Hispanic, and Underrepresented Minorities (all other groups). Hispanic students rated most of these top reasons as more important than their peers, particularly Financial Aid Offers and Quality of the Intended Major, with Other URM peers rating these slightly lower than Hispanic students and Non-URM students the lowest; see Chart 7a:



Race – SIR No: We examined results by race/ethnicity, and chose to compare three categories, based on similarity of responses- Non-Underrepresented Minorities (including Asian, White, and Unknown), Hispanic, and Underrepresented Minorities (all other groups). Some key differences can be seen in the Hispanic students, who were more concerned with the lack of an honors program (24%), had more financial aid from another college (24%) and that the cost was too high (24%) compared to responses from the other groups which were around ten percentage points lower for these options. Non-URM students were more concerned with being too close to home (20%) and advice from parents/relatives (14%) compared to other students; see Chart 7b for details:



Conclusions

Overall, we found similarities in response patterns across years and breakouts, with a few key differences that may be used to tailor marketing and outreach to different groups of prospective students. For example, Engineering students find the quality of the major most important, while the top concern of other students is Financial Aid. Additionally, Natural Sciences students rated Research Projects more highly than other students (it was their 4th most important item). For Referral students, high costs were the most frequent reason for not submitting an SIR, while quality of the major and UC reputation were the most important for submitting an SIR. Financial aid, program quality, helpfulness of faculty and staff, as well as UC reputation have remained important over the years, and the advice of parents and relatives was important across many demographic breakouts. It may be worthwhile to investigate how students and parents are making judgements around the quality of the major and working towards providing access to material that will best illustrate the strengths of various programs. Additionally, an Honors program should be considered, and if implemented, it would have wide appeal, particularly among Transfers, First Generation students, and Hispanic students.

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