

# UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

## *A Decade of Change: The Demographics, Behaviors, Attitudes and Aspirations of First-time UCSD Freshman Students 1991-2002*

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The Freshman Survey is administered to new students to provide the campus community with information on the changing background, goals, aspirations, and values of its first-time freshmen and new transfer students. 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 five times – in 1986, 1988, 1991, 1996 and 2002. Information gathered 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, use of websites, choice of major, student aspirations, and pre-college activities (e.g., volunteerism, studying, service learning).

The most recent administration of the CIRP resulted in the highest response rate ever recorded for incoming UCSD freshmen. Through the effort and cooperation of the Orientation Directors and staff at each of our six colleges, and the support and guidance provided by the College Deans and Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs, over 4,000 incoming UCSD freshmen and transfer students were surveyed. Of the 3,789 freshmen surveyed, 2,066 were female and 1,723 were male. This year also marked the first time that incoming transfers were surveyed. Among the 363 transfer students surveyed, 210 were female and 153 were male. The response rate for transfer students was lower because the CIRP was mailed to new transfers rather than given in a proctored setting. This report will describe the trends in responses among new freshmen only. A separate report describing the responses of transfer students is forthcoming.

In this report to the campus community, selected findings obtained from the 2002 Freshman Survey are discussed in the context of previously obtained findings. Tables presenting complete statistical data obtained from each administration of the Freshman Survey over the last 20 years can be found in the “Surveys” section of the Student Research and Information (SRI) website at <http://ugr8.ucsd.edu/>.

### **A DECADE OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE**

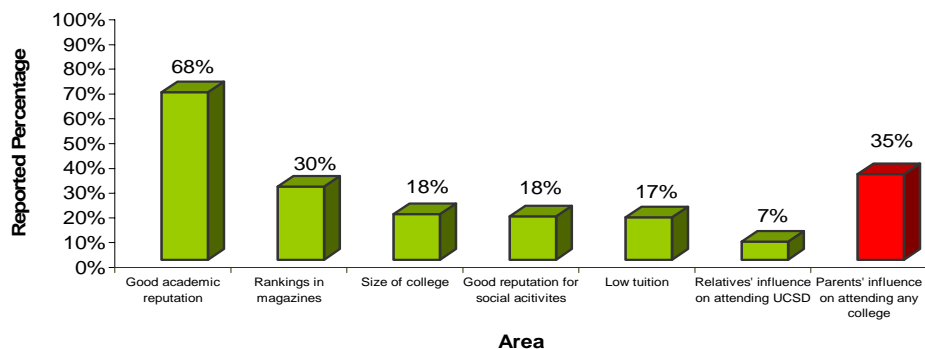
The reported ethnic backgrounds of the 2002 cohort have changed since the 1991 Freshman Survey. Over the last decade, there were declines in the proportions of UCSD-bound students reporting their ethnic background as “African-American/Black” (1% in 2002 compared to 2% in 1991), “American Indian/Alaskan Native” (1% in 2002 compared to 2% in 1991) and “White/Caucasian” (44% in 2002 compared to 59% in 1991). Incoming freshmen reporting their ethnic background as “Asian

American/Asian” (43% in 2002 compared to 33% in 1991) have continuously increased over the past two decades and proportions of incoming students reporting their ethnic background as “Mexican American/Chicano” has remained steady at 8%. In addition, “Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander” and “Other Latino” account for 3% and 3%, respectively, of UCSD-bound students in 2002. The number of incoming UCSD students that report a language other than English as their native language has increased from 22% in 1991 to 31% in 2002. In addition, over the past decade, the proportion of incoming female students increased slightly from 53% in 1991 to 55 % in 2002.

## 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. Over two-thirds (67%) of the 2002 freshman cohort reported this factor as being “very important.” Among prospective freshmen, UCSD’s “good academic reputation” was the most important factor influencing their decision to enroll (68%). Other substantial factors influencing the decision to attend UCSD included “rankings in national magazines” (30%), “size of the college” (18%), “good reputation for social activities” (18%) and “low tuition” (17%) (*see figure 1*). The Internet has become an increasingly important recruiting tool and source of information for new students. The University’s website along with individual department websites (such as Admissions) provide other valuable sources of information about the University and the Colleges. When asked, “Which UCSD publication was most helpful to you for campus and admission information?” almost half of incoming freshmen (45%) responded the “UCSD admissions website.” In addition, almost a quarter (24%) of UCSD-bound freshmen responded that the University’s website gave them “the most useful information about UCSD” only second to “attending admit day.” Attending “Admit Day” received the preponderate number of responses with respect to obtaining useful information about UCSD.

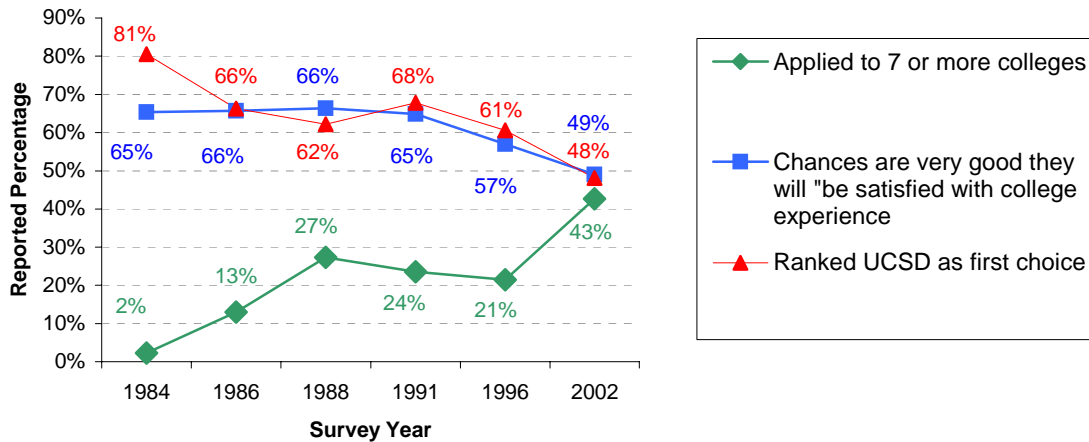
**Figure 1: "Very Important" Factors Influencing Decision to Attend UCSD (2002 Cohort)**



Even with the substantial growth in UCSD’s academic reputation and academic rigor, the proportion of students ranking UCSD as their first choice (48%) has declined from its record high of 81% in 1986. This first choice ranking could potentially be declining because students are applying to more colleges or as a result of a revision in UC policies allowing students to apply to more than one campus. The enhanced academic reputation of UCSD may also explain in part the attraction of the university to a highly competitive and capable group of students who are applying to other top colleges and universities throughout the country. Remarkably, 93% applied to 4 or more colleges while 43% applied to 7 or more colleges. At comparable selective public institutions, the percentage is quite lower, with only 26% applying to 7 or more colleges. In 1991, only half of incoming students (24%) applied to 7 or more colleges. These two factors could explain in part the decrease in UCSD-bound students that state chances

are very good they will “be satisfied with their college experience,” 49% in 2002 compared to 65% in 1991 (see figure 2).

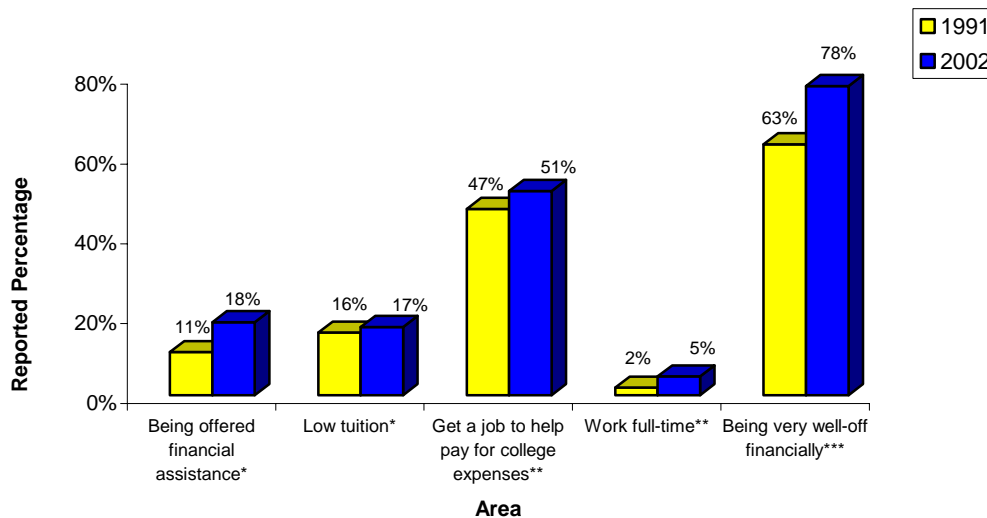
**Figure 2: Anticipated Levels of Satisfaction With UCSD**



**FINANCIAL CONCERNS PERSIST**

Financial needs continue to be important and pressing for UCSD-bound freshmen. Over half (56%) of incoming freshmen report that they have “some” concern about their ability to finance college while another 16% have “major” concerns. “Being offered financial assistance” (18% in 2002 compared to 11% in 1991) and “low tuition” (17% in 2002 compared to 16% in 1991) were increasingly important influencing factors when choosing UCSD. In addition, almost half of UCSD-bound students’ report that they will be taking out loans (44%) and approximately one-half (51%) of the entering freshmen indicated that there is a “very good chance” they would get a job to pay expenses. There was also a small increase in the proportion of incoming freshmen that estimate chances are very good they will “work full-time while attending college” (5% in 2002 compared with 2% in 1991). Finally, the most important long-term objective of the 2002 cohort was “being very well off financially” which increased from 63% in 1991 to 78% in 2002 (see figure 3). This reflects a national trend among college freshmen.

**Figure 3: Comparing Financial Concerns:  
1991 versus 2002**

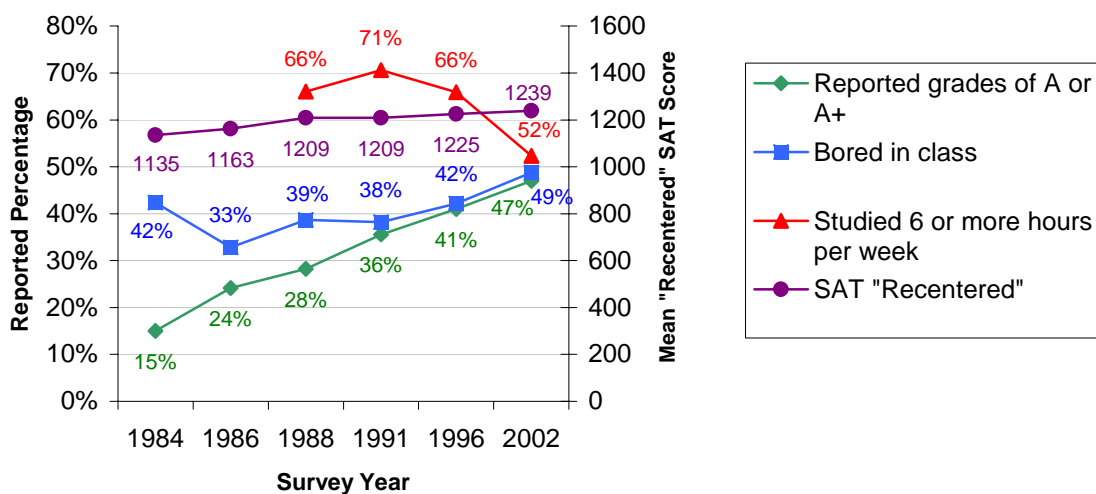


(\*Very important influencing factor, \*\*Student estimates very good chance, \*\*\*Essential or very important objective)

### “GRADE INFLATION” CONTINUES

Throughout the last decade, the Higher Education Research Institute’s (HERI) national norms show that college-bound freshmen are continuing to receive higher high school grades than in the past. The proportion of UCSD freshmen reporting average high school grades of A or A+ continues to increase. This percentage grew in 2002 to 47% from 36% in 1991. At UCSD, part of the increase in grade point averages is the result of increased selectivity in undergraduate admissions; however, the increase in grades at UCSD could reflect the national trend of “grade inflation” suggested by the researchers at HERI. The trend in achieving higher grades in high school is also reflected in a continuing rise in the SAT I composite scores of incoming UCSD freshmen as also shown in figure 4. This trend reflects the increasingly competitive nature of admission to UCSD over the past decade.

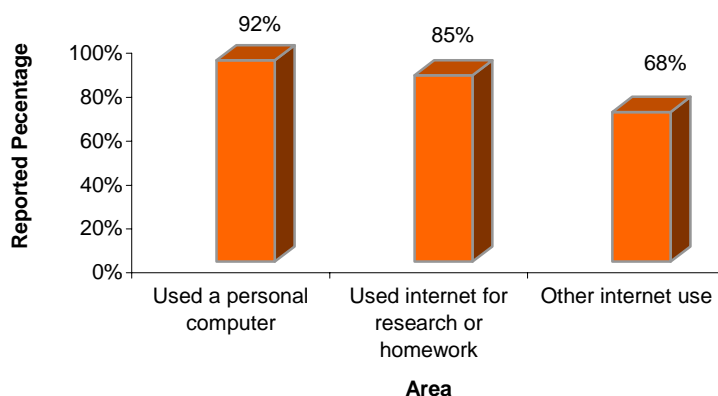
**Figure 4: Grades and Academic Behavior**



Despite the trend in higher grades and test scores, there appears to be a certain degree of academic disengagement among UCSD-bound students as suggested by self-reported activities or behaviors (*see figure 4*). The proportion of UCSD freshmen reporting being frequently “bored in class” while in high school reached a record high of 49% in 2002 compared to 38% in 1991. In addition, the number of incoming students who studied 6 or more hours per week has declined since 1991. In 2002, slightly more than half of students (52%) studied more than 6 hours per week compared with 71% in 1991. This trend mirrors national HERI data for both highly selective colleges and universities, and all public universities included in the HERI survey data.

However, the proportion of UCSD-bound students that report studying 6 or more hours per week is still higher than the national norm (33%). HERI states, “It is unclear from this (sic) data whether computer and Internet use have enabled students to complete their homework in less time, or whether the time students spend using the computer simply takes away from the time that they could be spending on their studies.” At UCSD, 92% of incoming freshmen “used a personal computer,” 85% “used internet for research or homework” and another 68% noted “other internet use” (*see figure 5*).

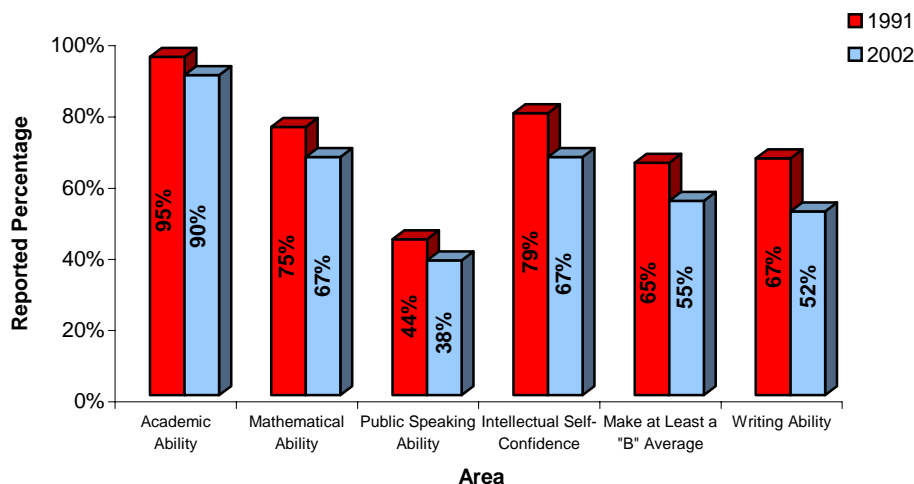
**Figure 5: Computer Use in the Last Year**



## **GRADES ARE UP, BUT ACADEMIC CONFIDENCE REMAINS LOW**

Despite increased high school grades and test scores, self-ratings in both academic and social confidence have declined over the last decade. Proportions of incoming students that rated themselves as being “above average” or in the “highest 10%” in “academic ability,” “intellectual self-confidence,” “mathematical ability,” “writing ability” and “public speaking ability” all declined over the last decade (*see figure 6*). Interestingly, many students expressed concern about doing well academically despite higher reported grades. The biggest problem/source of concern for incoming freshmen remains “doing well academically” (53%). Moreover, the number of students who believe they will “make at least a ‘B’ average” fell from 65% in 1991 to 55% in 2002. It is likely their concerns account for an increase in the number of UCSD-bound students that report they will seek additional academic assistance. Over the last decade, the number of incoming students who self-report that they will need special tutoring or remedial work in “mathematics,” “science” and “foreign language” has increased, even while high school grade point averages have risen. In addition, almost a fifth (19%) of UCSD-bound students feel they will need help with their writing. Although the confidence of incoming freshmen wavers, the students have set their career goals high with 90% reporting that they intend to receive a degree beyond the bachelor’s degree.

Figure 6: Self-Reported "Above Average" or "Highest 10%"

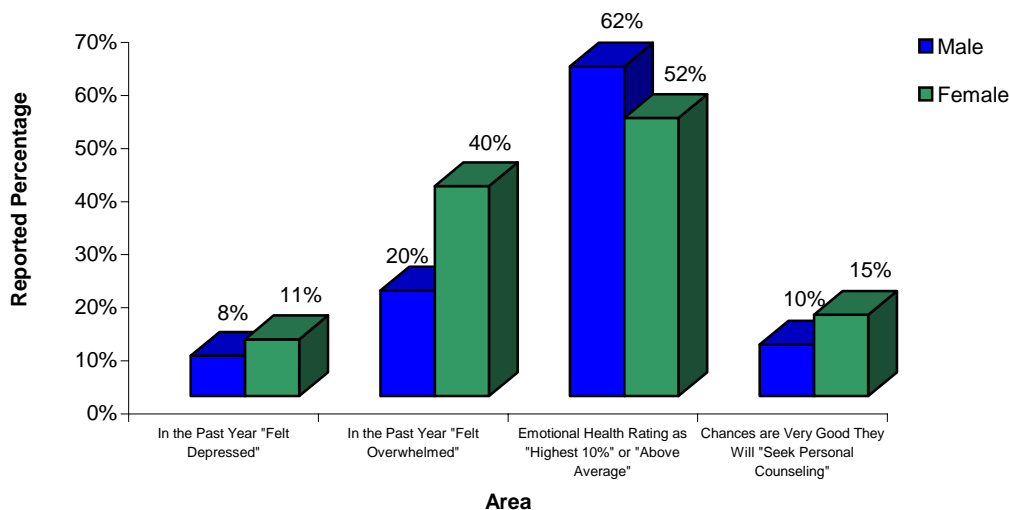


The survey data suggest some differences between male and female students' self-reported confidence ratings. Incoming male students tended to rate themselves higher than female students in the academic and skill areas. These areas include "academic ability" (92% for males compared to 88% for females), "mathematical ability" (79% versus 57%), "computer skills" (62% versus 26%) and "intellectual self-confidence" (77% versus 59%). There was little difference in self-reported "public speaking ability" (39% versus 37%). In addition, more incoming male students believe they will "make at least a 'B' average," 59% compared to 51%.

The Freshman survey data also suggest a continuing decline in self-reported social skill ratings. Self-ratings of "above average" or "highest 10%" in "social self-confidence" (48% in 2002 compared to 56% in 1991), "understanding of others" (70% in 2002 compared to 80% in 1991), "leadership ability" (57% in 2002 compared to 63% in 1991) and "cooperativeness" (48% in 2002 compared to 81% in 1991) have all declined in the last decade. Decreases in "emotional health" ratings (57% in 2002 compared to 68% in 1991) may be related to the rise in the number of incoming freshmen who estimate chances are very good that they will "seek personal counseling" which has increased from 2% in 1991 to 13% in 2002.

UCSD-bound females are more likely to indicate that they often or occasionally feel depressed, overwhelmed, intend to seek personal counseling and self-report lower emotional health (*see Figure 7*). In the past year, 11% of females reported they "felt depressed" compared to 8% of incoming male freshmen. Further, 40% of incoming female freshmen "felt overwhelmed by all I had to do" compared with 20% of UCSD-bound male students. Despite declines in social skills of both sexes, developing and maintaining friendships remains important. Almost three-quarters of incoming students (73%) estimate that they will "develop close friendships with other students" and during the last year 93% "studied with other students." This finding runs counter to other findings that students are demonstrating somewhat lower levels of academic engagement.

**Figure 7: Gender Differences In Emotional Health Ratings**



## SHIFT IN POLITICAL VIEWS

HERI states that events such as “the hotly-contested 2000 presidential election and events of September 11, 2001” may be responsible for the shift in moderate and conservative political orientations and increases in political interest. At UCSD, the political orientation of UCSD-bound students changed slightly since 1991. The largest proportion of incoming freshmen (46%) reported “middle of the road” views. The number of incoming freshmen reporting liberal views increased to 36% in 2002, up slightly from 33% in 1991 whereas students reporting conservative views (15%) dropped from 19% in 1991. This change in political orientations is different than national norms where HERI reports a shift towards conservative political orientations.

This shift toward more liberal political views however follows an uneven pattern when new freshmen are queried about specific issues or social policies. For example, there is growing support for more liberal laws with respect to the legalization of marijuana. Although approximately 60% still oppose legalization, this proportion has fallen from 77% in 1991. Seventy percent of incoming UCSD freshmen in 2002 agreed with the statement that “abortion should be legal, ” compared with approximately 77% holding this view in 1991. There is lower support for the death penalty than a decade ago. In 1991, approximately 26% of new freshmen agreed that “the death penalty should be abolished.” In 2002, the proportion agreeing with this view on the death penalty grew to approximately 34%. On the other hand, there has also been a strong shift with respect to views on federal military spending since the events of September 11, 2001. For example, in 1991, approximately 9% of incoming UCSD freshmen agreed, “federal military spending should be increased.” In 2002, approximately 32% of incoming freshmen agreed with this same statement on federal military spending. Approximately 37% of males and 27% of females agreed with this statement.

Nationally, there was an increase in students “keeping up to date with political affairs.” Approximately 38% of UCSD-bound students consider this objective to be an “essential” or “very important” life goal. This proportion is higher than the national norms (33%) and other selective

universities (37%). Since 1991, at UCSD this proportion has declined from 57% in 1991 to 38% in 2002. Further, there was a decrease in the proportion of incoming freshmen who “discussed politics” in the last year—26% down from 39% in 1991.

Although the demographics of the freshman class have changed since 1991, the proportion of incoming freshmen reporting that “the importance of the university to promote greater understanding among students of diverse ethnic backgrounds” is “essential” or “very important” has remained relatively consistent (between 63%-66%) since 1988 when the question was first asked. On whether affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished, 64% in 2002 “agree strongly” or “somewhat” (this question was not asked in 1991). With respect to the question of same sex marriage, approximately 69% of UCSD freshmen agreed with the statement, “same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status.” Women were more in agreement with the statement than were men, with 74% of the women in agreement compared to 63% of men. UCSD students had more liberal views on this question than freshmen at other highly selective public universities by approximately five percent (69% at UCSD compared to 65% at other “high selectivity” colleges and universities).

## **ENGINEERING AND BIOLOGY ARE THE MOST POPULAR AT UCSD**

In 2002, selection of “engineering” as a probable major increased in popularity. This choice increased from 15% in 1991 to 20% in 2002. It is important to note that the sex of the respondent plays a role in selection. Male students preferred this probable major more than female students - 34% compared to 8%. In anticipating a probable career field, “engineer” reflected only 13% of UCSD-bound freshmen’s responses.

Over the last decade, the selection of “biology” as a probable major by incoming freshmen has remained consistent (21%), making this choice the most often identified probable major for UCSD-bound students. However, the number of students choosing “Doctor/Dentist” as a probable career field in 2002 declined with only 17% of freshmen choosing this choice compared with 25% in 1991.

There has been a growing interest in majoring in fields with a greater careerist orientation. This perhaps reflects a greater interest by respondents in career options and employability at graduation. For example, since 1991, there have been small increases in “business,” “programmer,” “educator,” and “health professional” as probable career choices and decrease in the preferences of “lawyer” and “artist.”

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## **DISCUSSION**

The findings presented here represent some of the highlights selected from the 2002 Freshman Survey. The results indicate that UCSD’s 2002 entering freshmen class consists of highly motivated, academically prepared and socially conscious individuals with high educational and career objectives. However, new students indicate some anxiety with respect to performing well academically while attending UCSD. From an institutional perspective, results from the Freshman Survey show that UCSD is an institution known for its academic rigor and excellence. Prospective students continue to consider UCSD to be an academically challenging institution.

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 and a steady rise in SAT scores). Despite higher grades, “doing well academically,” continues to be the “biggest problem/source of worry” for new students. Other concerns include

financing their education. Tuition and financial assistance are increasingly important reasons for deciding to come to UCSD.

Computers are used heavily by incoming UCSD freshmen and are important academic and recruiting tools. High proportions of students are using computers for personal use as well as the Internet for academic purposes. There is a disparity in skill level between the sexes with 62% of male UCSD-bound freshmen rating their “computer skills in the top 10%,” compared with 26% of females giving themselves the same proficiency rating. Also related, the University’s website has become an increasingly important recruiting tool. Also the University’s website and other department websites have become an increasingly important recruiting tool, particularly for female high school students considering the University.

UCSD-bound freshmen are academically and career focused. The clear majority (91%) would like to continue their education beyond their bachelor’s degree. Areas that students perceive they will need the most help in include “help with career plans” and “academic plans.” It is important to note the decreasing levels of academic and social confidence among UCSD-bound students. This has implications for academic and personal counseling and other student support services.

Compared with 1991 data, there is a growing interest in “engineering” as a probable major among UCSD-bound freshmen. Although careers in health, especially “Doctor/Dentist,” are still the most popular among new freshmen at UCSD, their popularity declined. Volunteer work is still popular with incoming students, with 90% reporting engaging in it “occasionally” or “frequently.” The two most important objectives for a large proportion of the 2002 freshmen class are “being well off financially” (76%) and “raising a family” (72%).