

The Survey

With the use of Student Voice, a 46-question survey was sent to currently enrolled UC San Diego students' parents/guardians. The survey was sent electronically to a list of 14,986 e-mail addresses 2,446 which failed, and therefore resulted in a 12,540 mailbox success rate. E-mail addresses used were listed as part of the current student's TritonLink profile. The survey opened February 12, 2009 and closed March 20, 2009. A reminder was sent February 24, 2009 and the survey was announced again in the March *Triton Family Connection* e-newsletter sent on March 12, 2009. By the conclusion of data collection, a total of 1925 respondents were logged, 1648 surveys were completed. As a result of completing the survey, family members responding separately entered their email address for a chance of winning one of two \$100 UCSD Bookstore gift cards or free registration for a family for Family Weekend.

The survey elicited relatively equal participation across College affiliation, Revelle (327, 19.75%), Muir (294, 17.75%), Marshall (264, 15.94%), Warren (229, 13.83%), Roosevelt (289, 17.45%), and Sixth (253, 15.28%) and class status, First Year Students (550, 33.29%), Sophomore (394, 23.85%), Junior (410, 24.82%), and Senior (298, 18.04%). Additionally, there was strong representation of both those parents/families that had students living on-campus (877, 53.09%) and those off-campus (710, 42.98%) with a small percentage living at home (65, 3.93%). The majority of the individuals responding identified as being a Mother/Father (1640, 99.27%), while there were others who identified as Guardian, Aunt/Uncle, Grandparent, or Other. In identifying their student's gender Female students were more represented than Males (877, 53.09% vs. 710, 42.98%) and there were no students identified as Transgendered. The majority of family members who responded hailed from Southern California (819, 49.67%). Northern California ranked second (600, 36.39%), and those who noted living Out of State third (99, 6%). The individuals that responded were also largely college educated. The largest population responding had obtained a Bachelors degree (626, 37.96%). Approximately 25% had obtained a Masters degree (24.98%, 412), followed by Professional Degrees (9.58%, 158), High School Diplomas (9.28%, 153) and then Doctoral degrees (6.31%, 104).

General Information/Involvement

The family members that responded came in high numbers to Parent/Family Orientation. Other events our families noted attending included admissions events, athletic events (both NCAA and intramural), art events (dance performances, cultural events), fraternity & sorority events, and award ceremonies. While the family members responding had constant contact with their students, it was not an overwhelming amount. The largest percentage of those responding cited speaking with their student "2 – 3 times a week," the next largest percentage was garnered by adding those that responded "more than once a day" and "daily." The majority of our family members communicated with students by calling the student's cell phone, then by email. A sizeable population (964, 28.35%) indicated that their "student initiated the contact." Open ended responses noted many family members using Facebook, Skype, iChat, Video Conferencing, and Webcam as mechanisms to communicate. These respondents however rarely (829, 50.27%) come to campus, and if they do, it is "1 – 2 times a quarter" (546, 33.11%). Families that visited most often (1 – 2 times a quarter) were from Southern California and the Inland Empire. All other populations visited rarely.

Key Themes

Academics – When asked about the importance of a challenging academic program, 68.70% of families noted that was "extremely important" for their student's undergraduate experience. An interest in, and disappointment with faculty accessibility and academic advising was a repeated theme in the open ended comments throughout the survey. A concentration of those family members which noted academics as "extremely important" had achieved their Bachelors and Masters degree. Academics were highlighted as the most important concern regarding their student (352, 21.26%) and was second to Finances as the most requested topic for parent/guardian opinion. Additionally, issues with faculty, classes, impacted majors, and quality of

instruction were all cited as reasons not to re-enroll a student at UC San Diego. Presented below are some of the respondent's comments to exhibit academic concerns:

"Biggest disappointment is my student's access to academic counseling when selecting classes. Even 'instant chat'...is not instant and not helpful at all."

"Faculty and staff have not been available and effective for academic help and counseling."

"Freshman need some smaller classes with professor involvement and mentoring to off-set the very large lecture hall courses for the fulfilling of general education requirements."

"I think instructors/professors need to spend more time with students, challenge them, and inspire them."

"It would appear that there are certain dynamics (social, time limitations, etc.) that omit some student's ability to interact with them [faculty] properly and gain assistance on an as needed basis."

Finances & Financial Aid – Families expressed both disappointments with, the availability of financial aid. There was also evidence of concerns regarding the future and finances.

"Adequate financial aid is more and more important. Especially during this economic downturn. Good communication about all of it is even more important. Student's families are stressed about money and it is impacting the students."

The desperation in our family's comments was tangible. One family member wrote, "access to financial aid and options outside of loans is large on our request for helping him complete his senior year at Revelle which will begin in the Fall." Another family member explained "if my daughter's financial aid is reduced, she might not be able to stay at UCSD." The families who most noted that adequate financial aid was "extremely important" had achieved Bachelors and Masters degrees.

Transitions – Transitioning to the university community, living with others, being a Winter Admit, being a Commuter Student, being a Transfer Student, and seeking assistance when needed were on the minds of our family members. Those individuals responding confirmed how large and decentralized the university can feel to both a new and experienced student. Between feeling lonely and lost, our families commented that students are struggling. Particularly the students that live off-campus and those that transferred to the university. For transfer students, there were concerns that there was generally a lack of connection and pleas to helping "the transfer student get more connected." Another family member asked that traditional first year students and transfer students have the same resources, "as a transfer student he was not very comfortable his first year. I think transfer students miss out on a lot of information and guidance that Freshman receive when admitted to UCSD."

One family member noted difficulties in transitioning but how her daughter coped:

A large public university such as UCSD is difficult to navigate for first year students. Our daughter has managed the transition well due in large part to the camaraderie she feels as part of the cross country and track team. Any way that students can be given support regarding making friends and reducing the anxiety of first year students would be helpful. UCSD has proven to be academically challenging to our daughter and the stress of exams and assignments has been a true test of her as both a student and young adult. Thank you for all you do to help our young people grow up in a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment.

Intra- and Interpersonal Communities – Making friends and connections in this environment was an important aspect of the student experience for our parents and family members.

She says the school is so big and everyone is so busy that it is hard to make friends, she has a lot of existing friends, but finds it difficult to get together with students from the campus, even though she is involved in a lot of school activities.

A family member noted that “personal relationships have come up several times. There still seems to be a lack of organized social activities for kids who don't really ‘party’ but want to do things in groups because it is harder to make close friends.” Another expressed,

I think UCSD students are extremely competent in academic areas but need support to integrate them as a ‘community’ of learners and future leaders. Our son's experience has been somewhat lacking - if it had not been for the water ski team, we feel that it would have been difficult for him to come into contact with students who were equally bright but also had a wide variety of interests. In some ways, there is too much emphasis on the ‘geekiness’ of Revelle which results in a ‘nerdfest’ of students who have a very limited understanding of the opportunities the world offers.

These comments manifested in commentary about everything from there being no social life and it is a suitcase campus to accusations of “rampant drugs and alcohol.” There were pleas for a sense of community similar to UCLA or UC Berkeley, and a football team.

Some of the more concerning comments emerged similar to this one, “apparently it's possible to go through a whole quarter with almost no human communication and interaction.” This was further substantiated by a family member of a commuter student, “UCSD was my son's first choice; however, he experienced a distance within the campus community as a commuter student. He realizes that not living on campus kept his connections to a minimum.”

Overall Wellness – A linkage between many of the issues discussed seemed to be connected to a lack of overall wellness perceived by our family members. Food was a major concern – lack of nutritious food, not enough variety, and quality of food. Families discussed the importance of their student being healthy which seemed difficult due to the high stress environment of the university.

A related topic raised in open ended responses were concerns with the university sponsored health insurance. Comments in the open sections focused on deadlines, not having flexibility around cancelling, or paying for additional insurance.

UCSD needs to modify how they charge for health insurance and their reimbursement policy. As parents, we need to be notified when this fee is being charged. Last year our student was charged this fee when we already have health insurance. You notify the student but not the parents. You refused to credit our account when I notified you that we had insurance. I cannot communicate how angry I get every time I think about this.

The comments mainly focused on there not being a need because families had their own insurance for the student through work or other means. The open ended comments however did not exactly match the quantitative responses – 54% of respondents noted that the availability of health insurance was “extremely important” or “very important” while 43% noted the availability as “moderately,” “slightly” or “not at all important.”

Details, Deadlines, Dissonance – There were concerns regarding communication of the important details, logistics, and policies. Whether it was financial aid or housing deadlines, there was a plea for more communication to parents and families directly. Student Affairs staff are traditionally proponents of student development and student accountability. However, from a perspective of honesty and empathy, it is normally the parents/guardians paying the bill or filing paperwork. Therefore, they want to be notified of deadlines for all aspects of a student's experience (housing, financial aid, student health insurance waivers, commencement, etc.).

There was also a recurring theme about having access to students' grades, the bill, and health records. It was evident that there was dissonance between expected information sharing and privacy laws – though those messages are reiterated during orientation and other pre-matriculation activities.

Their Role as Parents & Family Members

As noted previous, our family members attended events and participated in several activities the UC San Diego community had to offer. Questions were asked to gauge not only how family members are involved in the campus community but also their thoughts for engagement. More than 87% of those responding “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they felt UC San Diego includes parents and family members in the university community. Our families were aware of the many services offered to them both centrally and within the College communities including, orientation, the central parent/family Web site, email, helpline, and College-based Web sites.

84.38% of those responding said they did receive the *Triton Family Connection* e-newsletter and 76% found the newsletter “very helpful” or “moderately helpful.” Only 29.01% discussed the newsletter contents with their students, however the topics discussed recurred as consistent themes throughout the survey. Topics the individuals discussed with their student included, safety, activities on campus, dates/deadlines, commencement, major events, airport shuttles, and Summer Session. When cross tabulating the results of who found the newsletter helpful, the responses were greatest among those respondents with a Bachelors degree, second highest was those having achieved a Masters degree.

Family members responding agreed that the case for supporting UC San Diego was strong and compelling (1110, 66.11%) and were “very” or “moderately aware” of how the Parents Fund supports students and activities. With the financial challenges facing many of the individuals responding a total of 86% said that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” paying quarterly fees was all they could afford.

As we continue to engage family members in the university community, services and assistance noted of interest included:

- Seamless communication – centralize the decentralized.
- Increased incoming student communication
- Education on FERPA and related policies
- Heightened awareness about transitional services – for transfer students, students going on to graduate school, students looking for jobs
- Dates, calendars, logistics, details
- Information about safety and security on campus
- Person-to-person academic advising
- Financial Aid assistance
- Communication between and among other parents/family members
- Increase in a connection with the university – they do not just want to be called for money
- Involvement opportunities outside the campus – events near their home
- Increased, clear information on making payments to the university

Does it matter?

This survey of our current students' parents/families provides insight into the questions, needs, and concerns of our parents and family members, which has never been asked previously. Many may disregard the comments of our parent and family member community as a skewed perspective. We submit that many of the comments were most likely filtered through the students. When a student has a bad day, who better to tell than the listening ear of a family member – someone who will support them unconditionally.

Parents and guardians also do not have a voice in our community, mainly due to privacy laws but also for the sake of student autonomy. This survey provided an opportunity for parents and family members to have a voice in the life of the university community. This may account for the overly critical nature of the commentary.

The results of this survey however should not be dismissed entirely. In fact, when considering other surveys of students as analyzed by Student Research and Information in Student Affairs, many of the comments triangulate. The comments about faculty contact or lack thereof, are consistent with student feedback per the UCUES 2008 data. Percentages are small for students who communicated with faculty in person or email (35% noted occasionally) and 27.7% of students noted they rarely speak with faculty outside the classroom about course material. When answering the question of what would be the “most important improvement to undergraduate education,” students mirrored their parents/family members concerns regarding classes, professor/TA staff relationships, and social life.

When considering the UCUES and YFCY data, the biggest deviation was found between parent/family academic advising concerns and student’s satisfaction with academic advising at their College, department, and with faculty. Students largely found their experience with academic advising satisfactory or better.

Both the 2003 and 2007 Commuter Student Surveys corroborate several concerns of parents and family members. The 2003 survey found that commuter students feel “out of the loop” on events and feel a climate that is unwelcoming. A mixture of parking issues, the demanding nature of the quarter system, lack of welcoming spaces, and a focus on residential students seems to leave our commuter students on the fringe. Our parents and family members indicate the same concerns. Further, the YFCY indicates that 68.4% of students found themselves feeling isolated from campus life (including both commuter and residential students). The 2007 survey highlights the issues of parking and campus use. Our family members voiced many concerns not only about parking but also about living near campus (therefore having access to shuttles and busses). Parking is expensive and not easily found. Further, housing near campus is expensive and also hard to obtain without roommates.

According to the YFCY survey many comments expressed by students align with parents and family members. Students rated their overall academic experience positively. This would align with our family members. While the families expressed concerns about the academic experiences of their students, they still said they would reenroll their student and recommend the university to those looking to attend higher education. Additionally, satisfaction with financial aid packages was low for students responding to the YFCY. Family members in the parent and family survey also voiced their concerns with there not being enough financial aid to make college affordable.

Conclusions, Plans, Recommendations

As a result of this survey and considering other data from university sources, it is clear that information sharing and clarification for our parents and family members is vital. This survey also showed that an assumption that this college educated population understands how higher education works is inaccurate. Therefore, key areas for information sharing and clarification include:

- FERPA and Privacy Rights: Many questions were asked why a parent or guardian could not obtain grades, health records, or other private information. Simple education on privacy rights is in order.
- Differences between College-based Academic Advisors, Departmental Advisors, and Faculty: Per the differences between student and parent/family responses, clarifications are in order. Who advises, when, and to what degree?
- Parking and Transportation options: As the campus continues to balance a decreasing budget, a priority of sustainability, and student wants we must clarify with our parents/family members the options for transportation to campus and for them to investigate various options as serious possibilities.
- Nutrition and on-campus dining options: Obtain survey information from Housing, Dining, and Hospitality on student satisfaction with dining options and publicize that to families. Additionally, family members normally eat in the dining halls during Orientation and will during Family Weekend 2009.

- Student life and options for involvement: With 68.4% of students reporting feeling isolated on campus during their first year and parents and family members voicing concerns about student community, we need to consider how the campus is marketed and what “fun” means to those considering UC San Diego. Families that noted student life of importance had attended college themselves which raises the question of what their conceptualization of “fun” and “involvement” is for their student – should it mirror their own?

Something less tangible but important is a continuing movement to clarify the role of a parent or family member in the student’s experience. How we assist parents and family members to maintain effective relationships with their students is important beyond first year orientation. Our transfer parents and families also need that support and information. When 41.4% of students in the YFCY survey indicate that family responsibilities interfered with their schoolwork, there is an indication that clarification of roles is needed. It does however seem important to note that 88.7% of students responding to the YFCY survey indicated that they have had family support to succeed. Highlighting the importance of this topic, a family member wrote “the independent nature of the college student should be tempered by acceptance of the need for guidance, mentorship, and a ‘second opinion’ to put into the equation of their decisions.” We cannot and should not exclude our parents and family members from the information sharing or conceal the decision making processes of the university. Therefore, how we assist parents and family members to evolve a relationship with their student is important.

The National Study of Student Engagement and a recent dissertation study are just two external sources that further confirm the importance and need for effective parent and family engagement. The NSSE 2007 Annual Report noted that “the offspring of these so-called ‘helicopter parents’ also report gaining more from their college experience” (p. 10). Further, NSSE found that “about three quarters of all students frequently followed the advice of a parent or guardian, and more than four in ten students said they frequently followed the suggestions of siblings. Fewer were influenced frequently by friends” (p. 24). This study illustrates the importance of educating and engaging family members in the life of the university community. The key however is to train our family members how to have effective relationships, because as the NSSE research shows that “although students with involved parents reported higher levels of engagement, deep learning and greater educational gains, they had significantly lower grades” (p. 25). Research by Cullaty also illustrates that engagement is important and helpful to the development of student autonomy. Cullaty noted “autonomy develops in the context of supportive relationships...support involves listening to the student, asking questions, respecting independent decisions, and offering emotional encouragement.”

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry-foundation-mainmenu-153/foundationnews/2206-curry-online-spring-09-brian-cullaty>).

Aside from the day to day student experience is parent and family knowledge about fundraising and development. In times of economic crisis fundraising becomes more important. The survey results indicated they understood the strong and compelling need for fundraising. However, when asked if our families were aware of the \$1 million raised by family members through the Parent & Family Fund 33% said they were “not aware at all” or “not very aware” and only 39.8% were “very aware” or “extremely aware.” With 45.7% of families noting giving funds to other institutions it becomes of heightened importance to communicate clearly how the funds assist the institution, College, programs, and new initiatives. Our staff across campus need to become more comfortable asking for support and promoting why support is necessary to the lifeblood of the university.

These issues raised by our family members are further important for the marketing and message of why UC San Diego. While parents/guardians are not usually the lone decision maker of a student attending the university, they are involved in the decision making process. Therefore, how we communicate faculty-student relationships, student life, and integration of commuters/transfers must be honest and authentic. It is evident that our parents and family members would recommend the institution, which lends well to the reputation of the university. However, their concerns are evident and could have been curtailed earlier in the process.

After analyzing the results on a spectrum of this study, I come to the conclusion that our family members’ concerns and issues exist similar to a Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. Their biggest concerns are for “Basic

Support” (deadlines, dates, logistics), they have concerns about the Safety and Comfort of their student (food, room condition, literal safety), parents and family members want their students to belong (be involved, have fun, connect with others), they then want their student to understand themselves (as a leader, scholar, critical thinker), and then finally, when a student graduates their expectation is they will be independent and functional. Reading their concerns and considering their responses this continuum is evident. How the work of Student Affairs and colleagues throughout the institution work to secure these needs remains somewhat controversial. Our goal is simply to meet their needs and educate these individuals on how to evolve the relationship with their student so to meet the ultimate need of an independent and functional graduate.