



# Student Affairs Information and Research Office

In collaboration with the Office of Analysis of Information Management

A department of Student Affairs

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## Non-Resident Admissions Focus Group Report

*The Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) is the research and assessment office within UCLA’s Student Affairs organization. The mission of SAIRO is to support the learning and development of the whole student by providing reliable, timely, and useful information about students and their experiences; by developing the capacity of student affairs and other stakeholders to collect, interpret, and utilize data to enhance the quality of students’ educational experience and environment; and by helping Student Affairs units assess and document the effectiveness of their programs and practices.*

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### Executive Summary

During Spring Quarter 2010 institutional researchers at UCLA conducted three focus groups with out-of-state and international undergraduate students to learn more about how they chose to attend UCLA. The purpose of the research was to learn how the institution might successfully enroll more non-resident students in the future. Student comments suggest that some low-cost improvements in campus processes and information could provide large payoffs. They spoke of relationships and competitive advantages that UCLA could leverage more assertively. At the same time, they identified some of the structural disincentives and counseling discouragement that non-resident students face when they consider attending UCLA.

The students confirmed that UCLA has a pervasive international presence, and that a degree from UCLA is viewed as a very high-prestige asset. They indicated that UCLA is competitive with Berkeley. Moreover, word that UCLA is now more open to non-resident applicants is spreading, at least in the international area. For these students, two of the biggest disincentives to selecting UCLA were the difficulty of finding out what they wanted to know about the institution and the lack of personal outreach. They felt as though the entire process was designed for in-state students and no one had thought about helping non-residents, particularly international students, understand the terminology, the application, and the logistics. International students cited logistical frustrations on several fronts, including fitting international courses into the application, navigating the I-20 documentation process, the mismatch between orientation schedules and I-20 travel restrictions, and residence hall vacation schedules. The institutional researchers see a natural fit for a summer session that blends into fall quarter

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for these students. This would allow early travel to the United States, an expanded orientation to acclimate international students to the US higher education framework, and time to understand such everyday items as transportation. When asked how they would utilize that month, the international students mentioned help in making research opportunity connections, workshops, and a fair or tabling event to learn about job opportunities, student groups, academic options, etc.

Generally the international students were accepting of the out-of-state tuition and considered UCLA a good value. Domestic non-resident students were more critical about their role in the financial plan, although realistic in not expecting any institutional financial aid. Several, however, were quite articulate about their frustration in not being able to qualify for in-state tuition after their first year, having been under the impression that it was possible to obtain residency. The researchers were unable to determine exactly where their misinformation came from, but the students seemed to feel that the institution had misled them in this respect. Domestic non-resident students were also more frustrated by the recent increases in fees. They did not consider themselves to be wealthy and faced growing loans to finance their choice to attend UCLA. Analysis of other data revealed that many domestic non-resident students do in fact qualify for Pell grants and/or subsidized federal loans. It is clear that for some students the debt is worth the chance to attend UCLA, but this balance could be a delicate one. If the demand by these middle-class students is very price-elastic, another increase in fees could be detrimental to out-of-state enrollment.

The following recommendations are the researchers' suggestions for improving the recruitment, admissions, and enrolled student experience to address student observations:

- Provide more extensive information on the campus admissions website about the undergraduate experience, including lots of pictures, a video orientation, and links to other sources of information. Make the link for international students to the Dashew Center more explicit and place a lot of explicit applications assistance information there (i.e., how to convert grade equivalents for the application). Include "international" in the Dashew Center references.
- Leverage Facebook more heavily to link potential applicants and admitted applicants with student groups, applicant support groups, etc.
- Emphasize the surrounding Los Angeles area and the beauty of the campus more extensively in outreach and web materials.
- Leverage alumni by recognizing that their most effective contribution may be to encourage their own family and friends to apply and attend.
- Hire staff dedicated to assisting non-resident applicants, from creating more web information to responding promptly to application question emails, to helping liaison with financial aid, to understanding housing, to getting timely I-20 documents, to helping transition to US academics in Orientation.
- Create a mailing for non-resident admits that includes some type of personalized outreach, perhaps from the department of their major, and a description of campus services available to non-residents.
- Create a special late summer session for incoming international students that would allow them to travel to the US to attend orientation and enroll in a unit-bearing class at the same time, to make it financially effective and compliant with visa requirements. This session should be timed so that students can move into the residence halls and remain there because they do not have a local housing alternative.

## Background

In the face of declining state support for its core mission, UCLA has identified increasing non-resident enrollment as part of an overall strategy of efficiencies and revenue enhancement. The campus needs to understand why applicants choose to attend UCLA so that recruitment efforts can be deployed effectively to increase applications and yield of qualified applicants. In addition, the campus needs to be prepared to offer appropriate services to these students. In Fall Quarter 2009 a Non-Resident Enrollment Workgroup was charged by the Executive Vice Chancellor with researching these issues so that the campus could develop a non-resident enrollment goal and recruitment plan. The group included representatives from Student Affairs, the College, External Relations, the Provost's Office and Finance, Budget and Capital Programs. As part of the process, the workgroup requested assistance from the Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) in coordinating a set of focus groups to assist in gathering information regarding student perspectives on the application and decision-making process.

## Methodology

Three focus groups were conducted, one each with undergraduate students in the following populations: out-of-state, international direct entry, and international transfer.

## Recruitment and Sample

A random sample of 300 students in each category was selected and sent an email invitation to participate. The email included information about the purpose and timing of the focus group, and indicated that participants would be provided a meal during the session and awarded a \$20 gift-card to the UCLA Store for their participation. All students who responded that they were able to attend the focus group were included. The resultant sample of students for each of the groups is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Participant Demographics

	Out of State	International Direct Entry	International Transfer
Total Participants	12	10	5
Gender	3 male, 9 female	6 male, 4 female	2 male, 3 female
Race/Ethnicity	5 White, 6 Asian, 1 Unknown	9 Asian, 1 Latino	4 Asian, 1 Black/African American
Year in School (at UCLA)	3 first year, 3 second year, 3 third year, 3 fourth year	3 first year, 4 second year, 2 third year, 1 fourth year	3 first year, 1 second year, 1 third year
Major	Mathematics/Applied Science, Neuroscience, Design/Media Arts, Art, Environmental Science, Physics, History, Psychobiology, Political Science, Electrical Engineering, Biochemistry	Materials Engineering, Psychology, Business/Economics, Neuroscience, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Biology, Undeclared	Psychology, History, Anthropology, Biology
Home Location	Arizona, Texas, Maryland, Connecticut, Hawaii, Oregon, Nevada, Virginia, Washington	China, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, Netherlands, India, Pakistan, Brazil	Hong Kong, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Sri Lanka

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## **Focus Group Process and Analysis**

Students participated in a 90-minute focus group session which focused on three major content areas: 1) influences on the decision to apply, 2) UCLA's influence on the decision to attend, and 3) advice and information they would give to students like themselves (see Appendix for complete focus group interview guide). Each focus group was facilitated by two researchers from SAIRO and the Dashev Center for International Students and Scholars (DCISS). The focus groups were semi-structured. The facilitators guided participants toward areas of interest but allowed the conversation to be flexible enough to let students' own perspectives and ideas emerge. Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the transcripts for major themes was conducted by researchers from SAIRO, Analysis and Information Management (AIM), and DCISS.

## **Findings**

The results of the focus group analysis have been organized into several major content areas: a) information sources, b) recruitment and outreach, c) application factors, d) decision-making factors, and e) students' views of their UCLA experience. In each section, core themes and findings are presented along with illustrative quotes as well as observations and recommendations from the research team. Quotes were edited to eliminate filler language such as "uhm" and "like" but the core content of each quotation was preserved to ensure that the student's voices came through.

### **Primary Sources of Information about UCLA**

Information sources used by prospective students fell into two primary areas: a) people they knew, and b) web-based resources.

### **Family, Friends, and Alumni**

All focus group participants were asked to describe how they first heard of UCLA. Before describing how they acquired specific information about how to apply to and attend UCLA, students from all groups described a long-standing familiarity with UCLA's prestigious reputation. UCLA was described as an institution that students have known about almost all their lives and felt an affinity for without really knowing precisely where that feeling originated.

I have always known UCLA is a good school. (Out-of-state)

Well I guess it's just a world renowned school anyways, so of course I'd heard of UCLA. (Out-of-state)

I'm ethnically from Ethiopia, but I grew up in Saudi Arabia. And on CNN and all the television shows, it's always about UCLA. They bring in UCLA researchers or lawyers on Larry King or something, and you always hear about UCLA. And I knew that I wanted to go to Los Angeles, because it's very diverse. So I was just like, okay, UCLA. But I want to go to something smaller first. (International transfer)

Across all groups, parents, siblings, and other relatives (particularly those who had attended UCLA) provided information about UCLA's reputation as well as specific information about experiences within a particular field of study. Interestingly, students also described hearing about UCLA from family members attending other institutions in California.

I heard about UCLA through my cousins. They both went to Stanford, and they said this was a really good place to go, especially if you're thinking like, med school or something. (Out-of-state)

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I heard about it from around my high school, people talking about it, and then my brother, he went to school in California at Claremont and he told me a lot of good things about UCLA. (Out-of-state)

Some high school teachers and counselors provided non-resident students information, albeit limited, about UCLA. However, for the domestic out-of-state students, high school counselors often discouraged students from leaving the state and encouraged them to attend their local university. For international students, professional agencies often recommended UCLA as a viable college option.

Personally, my college counselor gave me the contact information of someone from my high school that had been admitted two years earlier, and I actually didn't find it very helpful because I felt like she was still discovering new things because she was at a big school, so I actually contacted an alumni and then wanted his feedback about what he thought about his experience a couple of years ago, and I thought that gave me a more conclusive overview of what the whole four years was like, rather than just, a year. (Out-of-state)

It was just like, if you want to go to a good school, you go out, but all my counselors and everyone told me not to come here. It was just because they said a lot of negative things about it so it was definitely on me to come here. (Out-of-state)

### **Web-Based Resources**

As students sought information about UCLA, they looked to UCLA's main website, UCLA's departmental websites, Wikipedia, Facebook and other social networking sites, college discussion forums, and YouTube for videos posted by UCLA students.

In terms of UCLA's websites, there were mixed feelings as to effectiveness. Although many students described the UCLA website as helpful, others said that it should provide non-resident students with a better understanding of what life is like at UCLA. Students identified the need for more photos of various parts of campus, Westwood, and the Los Angeles area. In addition to more photos, students said that videos of the campus, of daily student activities, and of what they can expect a dorm to look like would also increase the effectiveness of the UCLA website. All students identified the need for clearer understanding of terms related to housing and residential life, such as "suite" vs. "single" and what these options actually look like, rather than just a floor plan. In addition, they asked for information about what the community is like in different housing options; for example, is one more likely to house returning students versus incoming students. Another recommendation was to better advertise opportunities for involvement on campus.

They're just terrible [college websites]. I mean I – it took me forever to find something on UCLA, so I gave up and I went on Wikipedia, and Wikipedia was really good. (Out-of-state)

I feel like my extra-curriculars have given me so much more of an education and my involvement, and the political activists – I'm really into politics, and the political activism on this campus is just amazing, and I feel like that's something they don't really advertise. Like, it's just how incredible the opportunities are to get involved here are, and I feel like that's where I – probably where I've gotten the majority of my education and where I've learned the most. (Out-of-state)

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For international students in particular, UCLA's website lacked important information that they felt they needed to adjust to life in the United States and at UCLA specifically. They felt that the information on UCLA's website was tailored for domestic students who are familiar with the American educational system and identified the need for more information about basic concepts, such as "quarter" and "unit," etc. They also felt they needed more information about what life is like in the residence halls and on campus generally. They suggested more readily available links to the Dashew Center's webpage where they can find information directed toward international applicants.

I think UCLA does a good job providing us with information that's direct but...not necessarily personalized information. I signed up for De Neve [housing] because it had a private bathroom, and I was like, "Okay, that's all I need," but I didn't realize that that's the dorm where everybody's either a second year or third year, and most of them go home for the weekends, so not only was I stuck with people who didn't wanna socialize with a freshman but also people who went home for the weekend, so it was like, the worst of all situations. (International direct entry)

There is a small section for international students, which is usually a lot of logistical stuff like Visa and interning and things like that, but if there could be a link for testimonies of international students and what their experiences were, maybe one from each continent to represent some kind of more personal, because what we're looking for...[finished by another student] what we're looking for is what the experience is going to be from someone who's out of the country. (International direct entry)

I guess you could find it out from international students, like we could – the problems that they had they could write, you know, like descriptions of say, the suites or people, who to contact. I had this problem and then make a website just of that information and put it on the Dashew webpage, and then international students coming in could just go to that website...because we face the same problems I feel, so if we could collectively just put out all that information on a website, that would be [helpful]. (International direct entry)

The Dashew website was really helpful. I sent about, I think, like 50 or 60 emails to my friend who joined here and she told me so much more. She explained so much. I guess it was through this friend I found out a lot of information, someone who was already in UCLA. Maybe a good idea would be to, if someone's applying, maybe connect them with someone who's already here so they can...connect with you or something. You know, it helps – it helps a lot. (International direct entry)

Departmental websites were critiqued for not providing a better understanding of what each major entails. Most said that they found only a list of courses rather than a thorough description of a major/department. Students also wanted more information about course credit information, and how their advanced high school or community college classes translate into course credit.

The first webpage that you see of UCLA– it's pretty flashy and like pretty effective and stuff, but when you're applying there, you're thinking about what major you're gonna do, and once you get down to those departmental sites, It's a little rough...The description of what the major is, is a list of numbers of classes that you have no idea what they mean. ... So maybe on the departmental side of the website, more like on their homepages about what a major is, they could provide a better kind of prospective student information rather than, you know, I'm a student at UCLA, and I need these classes, so to give you a better idea of what that major would be like at UCLA. (Out-of-state)

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As students sought web-based information on sites other than UCLA's main website, many looked to social networking sites like Facebook or various discussion forums. Forums that gave a glimpse into everyday life on campus were noted as particularly helpful. Overall, students said they looked for more personalized information about UCLA than what was provided on the website.

Those college forums helped a lot for me personally...Especially just seeing the threads, especially on the out of state kids. There's always these kids that say, "Should I come to UCLA? I live in so-and-so," and then everyone gives their opinion, and that really helped me try and figure out if I wanted to come or not. (Out-of-state)

**Observations/Recommendations:**

*Provide more extensive information on the campus admissions website about the undergraduate experience, including lots of pictures, a video orientation, and links to other sources of information. Make the link for international students to the Dashew Center more explicit and place a lot of explicit applications assistance information there (i.e., how to convert grade equivalents for the application). Include "international" in the Dashew Center references.*

*Leverage Facebook more heavily to link potential applicants and admitted applicants with student groups, applicant support groups, etc.*

*Emphasize the surrounding Los Angeles area and the beauty of the campus more extensively in outreach and web materials.*

**Recruitment and Outreach**

In contrast to the variety and volume of conversation generated by the students with regard to how they themselves sought out and obtained information about UCLA, they had much less to say about institutional outreach efforts, and most had received little, if any, outreach from UCLA. In fact, many seemed surprised by questions about outreach and whether or not they should have expected to receive some. Most students did recall receiving a "welcome packet" from UCLA when they were admitted and saw it as a useful source of information, though it did not seem to be a major factor in influencing decisions to attend. Specific outreach mentioned by individual students included:

- Email from the psychology department to transfer students with some recommendations for course taking patterns/course load for fall.
- Outreach DVD from the marching band
- Flyers/mailings from sororities
- Invitation to an alumni event in their state

International transfer students were more likely to have spoken with someone from UCLA—because like most transfers they came from local area schools where admissions representatives were present at college fairs and through the Transfer Alliance Program. However, this contact was generally well before the application and decision-making period.

UCLA compared unfavorably to many of the other institutions students considered, especially the Ivy League, when it came to the level and personalization of outreach efforts.

At the other schools I did apply to, like Irvine, like San Diego...they did send a lot of emails about stuff going on, campus programs, all that kind of stuff, like...transfer days, all that stuff. But in comparison I don't think UCLA did that much. (International transfer)

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Even after I got accepted, UCLA just sent me a letter, here congratulations. I don't even know if they wrote my name...just "congratulations" or whatever, but the private schools I got into, they called me. They emailed me specific to my needs, they asked me about financial aid, and they were just very personal. (International direct entry)

A lot of the Ivy Leagues...I would get so many flyers in the mail about [seminars and events]—I think Harvard had at least four seminars...speakers, come to regions of my area...bring flyers about different opportunities. I think UCLA is considered one of the West Coast Ivys, so I don't think it is unreasonable for them to hold seminars. (Out-of-state)

I feel like a lot of us mentioned hearing about UCLA through a family friend and I feel like there's not that much outreach, at least in my area [East Coast] for West Coast schools. (Out-of-state)

The out-of-state group did have some debate about whether UCLA, as a state school, should or could be expected to do outreach similar to that done by private schools—particularly for non-resident students. This debate related to broader differences in perceptions among the students about what UCLA should be expected to provide for out-of-state students more broadly, for example in financial aid and other forms of support.

I think that if they did start doing that, that'd go against the message that this is the school for California students...this was why the institution was created. It's not their duty to outreach to out-of-state students. (Out-of-state)

The majority of participants could not recall any specific outreach from UCLA, and those who did receive invitations to yield events noted that they often could not attend because travel was cost prohibitive. This was true even for events in their state/country because they were not close to where the students actually lived. International students also had visa concerns and often were not able to travel before they received an I-20. This restriction even limited their ability to attend orientation as the final orientation session was scheduled more than 30 days before the start of the quarter and thus outside the maximum limits of their I-20.

I got one email about having a picnic in Oregon with the alumni...but it was really far away. (Out-of-state)

It is not feasible to fly from Pakistan to L.A. in June or July...and then fly back and then [fly back again] in September...that's not possible. (International direct entry)

Students recommended that the UC system advertise as whole rather than as individual campuses. Recruitment by UCLA and UC Berkeley individually was deemed a weak recruitment effort by students who saw the value in "selling" the entire UC system. Several also mentioned the ease of filling out one application and filing it at multiple UC campuses. This encouraged them to apply to campuses they might not have originally considered.

It might be useful for the UCs to present a whole front of saying "you guys should apply to UCs" rather than just UCLA and UC Berkeley recruiting on their own. If they combine their efforts I think that might bring a little bit more knowledge to the UC system and UCLA specifically afterwards. (Out-of-state)

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*Observations/Recommendations:*

*While more extensive outreach may not be feasible given resource constraints, several potentially lower cost options for increasing the personalized feel of outreach are apparent. Putting effort into personalization of electronic outreach with more customization for particular student circumstances and increasing involvement in outreach by student's major departments could increase the personalized feel as well targeting of population-specific core resources and information. Additional involvement of alumni in both face-to-face and other means of outreach is another potential avenue for connecting students to UCLA.*

### **Factors Influencing the Decision to Apply to UCLA**

A number of factors influenced non-resident students to apply to UCLA. The most prominent factors included a combination of influences related to cost, prestige and ranking of the institution, characteristics of the institution that would cultivate a enriching and rigorous academic experience, and the ease of the application process.

#### **Cost**

In relation to the cost of an undergraduate education for non-resident students, there were mixed responses among participants who thought that the cost of attendance was reasonable and others who said it was too high. International students were most likely to feel that UCLA was a good value for the education received; they expect to get the high quality of an Ivy experience at a more affordable price at UCLA.

It's really cost effective if you compare it with schools that are ranked higher than UCLA. Um, the conditions that you don't get any scholarship from the [other] universities as well, so if you don't have scholarship and don't have any external aids, then choose UCLA because the overall cost for the undergraduate years is the lowest compared to all the schools ranked higher than UCLA. (International direct entry)

Out-of-state students felt that they were not prepared for the cost of attendance over the duration of their tenure at UCLA, the lack of financial assistance, the inability to obtain in-state residency status, or the recent fee increases. Many indicated that there was a strong financial incentive to stay in-state.

In Texas they have this kind of system where every year, if your parents put money into a college fund for you, the government will put in money too. If you decide to go to a state school, all that money that the government gave you will go towards your tuition, I was the only person from my graduating class that applied to UCLA. (Out-of-state)

In Arizona especially, there's the state test. If you pass it, you get a full tuition waiver to ASU or U of A or NAU, so that's a huge incentive for most people I know, and then a lot of people, if they're in the top ten percent or something, or if they do moderately well, they can also get other scholarships too, so that covers their housing. A lot of my friends, they actually get a lot of money for going to ASU or something. They'll have like, \$3,000.00 extra at the end of the year, so that's a huge incentive for them. I'll go home, and they'll have new laptops, XBOX's, and stuff. I think that's a huge incentive for a lot of people in Arizona to stay in state. (Out-of-state)

#### **Prestige**

In terms of prestige, all students were aware of the international prestige associated with UCLA. For domestic students, many reported a lack of opportunities and options to attend rigorous postsecondary institutions in their home state and elected to attend more prestigious schools in California. The influence of a prestigious university seemed to be especially important to international students. Several mentioned that UCLA is

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widely-known outside of the US. International students were also more likely to pay attention to major/program rankings in addition to overall institution rankings and were impressed by the breath majors UCLA had offered.

Nevada only has two universities, and they're both some of the lowest ranked universities in the country... so I just had to go out of state if I wanted to get a decent education. (Out-of-state)

People think of UCLA as one of those top tier schools. (International transfer)

It's pretty well known abroad. (International transfer)

UCLA is famous for filming and beautiful campus, and I choose UCLA because of the name of the brand. (International transfer)

Well, I think for me it's because I like having different options, and UCLA has just this competitive atmosphere of we're not going to just gear ourselves on one thing. We're going to look at different things, and we're going to succeed in different things. And it kind of has this pride to it, because you work hard, and you want to succeed in whatever you do, and you want your campus to have that atmosphere as well. ...So you get excited when you say, oh, in the history department we have this many people that have won Pulitzer Prizes, or – regardless of what it is. Or have done this research. Our students are being able to have opportunity to be in journals, or help out in doing different things. And that just makes it more of an advantage, because it's not just school. It's more than that. (International transfer)

People from China apply for dozens of schools in high school, and they don't really care about which school is most preferable... they just choose some – something that ranks high on the list. (International direct entry)

Connected to prestige, both domestic and international students believed that a degree from UCLA would offer more opportunities to obtain a job after graduation and some reported the belief that UCLA would actually find a job for them.

And so many people keep telling me, like, yeah, you should go to UCLA, because like if you get in, if you graduate from UCLA, lots of job want you. (International transfer)

They [UCLA] have really good job placement programs... I felt so much safer knowing that UCLA, that they were really gonna make an effort to get me a job doing what I wanna do somewhere, like there was gonna be a lot of help in that direction. (Out-of-state)

Many students were also drawn to the reputation of known alumnae who had previously attended UCLA and their successes.

There's a lot of really notable people that came out of UCLA and it's known for its really reputable staff. (Out-of-state)

### **Positive Institutional Characteristics**

In combination with the well-known academic prestige of UCLA, students were also drawn to the city of Los Angeles, campus safety, and the diversity of the student body on campus. The warm weather, proximity and accessibility to events and activities, and neighboring ethnic communities were all positive attributes associated with living in Los Angeles.

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Yeah, sort of seeing it is a big one, because the reason I came to UCLA is because of the campus. I had a summer school program here [in my] sophomore year, and I just fell in love with this school. So it's basically L.A. weather and the UCLA campus that got me to come here. Seeing this campus does make a big difference compared to a lot of other campuses that are just sad, like sad– that's basically how I describe them. (International direct entry)

Both domestic and international students also reported that a sense of a safe college campus was an appealing factor. On campus, students were interested in interacting with students who were from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Many students reported that their home state lacked the racial diversity that UCLA offered.

It was different for me because, from Nevada, there's no diversity. (Out-of-state)

### **Ease of Application**

Students also reported that a centralized application process for all University of California campuses and the ease of applying to more than one school with “a check of the box” was a deciding factor to apply to UCLA. However despite the ease, students also reported a few notable challenges in the application process. Challenges included the ability to get timely and helpful responses to questions regarding the application or financial aid and the lack of support, or at times active discouragement, from some out-of-state college counselors. Students reported that their counselors were not familiar with the application process or procedures. Students who wanted to seek help with their application also noted that inability to print out a sample of the application made it difficult to consult with others.

I applied to UC Berkeley, and then I realized I could do a couple more applications in the same click, and so I applied to UCLA and UCSD also. (Out-of-state)

In Arizona, my high school – my counselors were like, it's up to you to apply to the UC schools. We can't help you with their application. (Out-of-state)

International students who had transferred to UCLA from a community college reported that they had intentionally attended a community college first. Students were well aware of the high transfer rates between specific community colleges and UCLA. These students reported that they did not apply to UCLA as freshmen.

I was looking at class size. I was looking at the atmosphere. I was looking at the programs they had and the opportunities to move to other programs. And I really like UCLA. The cost was important, and the fact that the class size was really big. I didn't want to start off with that. So I decided to go to a JC first, and then transfer in to UCLA, where as a junior you have options to go into smaller class sizes.” (International transfer)

#### **Observations/Recommendations:**

*Maintaining UCLA's international exposure/presence seems to be especially important/effective in branding UCLA as a prestigious institution among international students.*

*Make available a PDF copy of the application questions on the admissions website that students can use in preparing application materials prior to online submission.*

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## **Factors Influencing the Decision to Enroll at UCLA**

Following students' decisions to apply to UCLA, students reported that many of the same factors that guided their decision to apply to UCLA (e.g., academic rigor, prestige and research opportunities, location of campus, potential diverse interactions, etc.) also influenced their decision to attend. However, students also reported a number of factors and experience that further affirmed their decisions to attend UCLA. Many students related that orientation was an exciting experience that solidified their identity as a Bruin and assured them that they had made the right choice.

Orientation was awesome...that made it. That made my decision for me. I mean, I had already almost decided, but I was still not sure." (Out-of-state student that had also submitted an Intent to Register to ASU)

Other students reported that a campus visit was an important experience to get the feel of campus. Additionally, some students reported that guaranteed housing and extracurricular activities were also important factors in their decision-making process.

So for me, it boiled down to...either I go to UC Berkeley or I go here...I just typed in Google, UC Berkeley versus UCLA, and you see like a lot of forum posts...[it] gave me a basic idea of how students respond to these schools and I just thought UCLA would be more suitable for me...[Also,] just looking at general school information, like how the dorms work out, UC Berkeley I think only guaranteed dorms for first years. (International direct entry)

While students had decided to attend UCLA, many reported concern and dissatisfaction with the size of the institution, lack of outreach and information, and the limited options for students who were interested in majoring in business. Most students were aware of the size of the institution when they had decided to attend UCLA but many feared that it would be an impersonal experience.

It's just such a big school and there's always complaints of not being able to know your professor. Coming from a very small – I'm sure a lot of us attended international schools where the teachers are very concerned and there's a very small faculty to student ratio. I think that would be something that would be lacking [compared to] a private college... [the private colleges] were just very personal. And so that was very different, but of course the strength of the program, and it's a very good research college, and the campus is beautiful. (International direct entry)

Students provided examples of unsupportive and unwelcoming experiences, particularly with the Registrar's Office.

I even called multiple times...the registrar's office and tried to check how that works and stuff. When I came in, I was under the impression that after a year if you made efforts [to] start paying taxes in California, if you get a California driver's license, that kind of thing, then you're gonna get it [in-state residency].... But then you came here, and that is totally not the case. (Out-of-state)

Recommendations from students included additional advising and accurate information regarding residency status out-of-state students and major requirements (including the transferability of general education (GE) or International Baccalaureate units) for international students. Additionally, direct contact from academic departments, though very limited, appears to be helpful and reassuring in the decision to attend UCLA.

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*Observations/Recommendations:*

*Increasing direct contact from academic departments would alleviate the impression that UCLA is just a big and impersonal campus to out-of-state and international students.*

**Students' Views of UCLA and their Experiences at UCLA**

Students' views of UCLA and their experiences were diverse, but several dominant themes emerged. These include: a) characteristics of the UCLA campus, b) perceptions of campus diversity, c) issues surrounding bureaucracy at UCLA, d) perceptions of nonresident students as "cash cows," and e) experiences within the UCLA community.

**Characteristics of UCLA Campus**

Students mentioned that each UC has a distinct campus reputation. For example, UC Berkeley tends to be associated with being an activist or politically active campus. Many students described UCLA as well-rounded campus in terms of academics, athletics, and student life. Several students specifically recognized UCLA's academic excellence in terms of the depth and breadth of majors and minors offered as well as the excellent teaching faculty. In addition to superior academics, students also commented on the campus' student life activities. Ultimately as a "complete" campus, students perceived that UCLA provides endless opportunities.

UCLA has everything...I feel like it's just well-rounded. So when you think UCLA, it's not just one thing. It's just everything. (International transfer)

The academic and as well the social environment here is really conducive to giving you a well rounded education. (International direct entry)

UCLA has just this competitive atmosphere of we're not going to just gear ourselves on one thing. We're going to look at different things, and we're going to succeed in different things...You can get involved in a lot of different things. (International transfer)

You get those really amazing professors...it makes getting up and walking down from the dorms just even better. (Out-of-state)

I love all of my history professors so far. They're all so amazing. They know so much information, and just being with them, I feel like I'm getting smarter. (Out-of-state)

Something that has really impressed me at UCLA is the student life...everything that's possibly could be offered is offered. (Out-of-state)

I was excited about the fact that I could kind of find myself and find things that would help me define my experience here. (Out-of-state)

*Observations/Recommendations:*

*Continue to advertise both academic and extracurricular opportunities at UCLA. Actively encourage students to balance their academic course loads with student life activities to make the most out of their UCLA experience.*

**Diversity**

There were mixed opinions about the extent to which UCLA was perceived as diverse depending on where the student came from. Some students reported being very satisfied with the diversity of UCLA. However, other students remarked that they expected UCLA to be more racially/ethnically diverse and were disappointed.

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I'm happy to be in a place with a lot of different types of people and groups coexisting.  
(Out-of-state)

I love the diversity. If I go to class, there are so many different ethnic groups, and with difference race. I like to interact with them because I think that's the way to widen my perspective with the world. (International direct entry)

The one thing I was really disappointed was the lack of racial diversity for me...I come from DC area and there's lots of international people and so people from all different countries, ethnicities. (Out-of-state)

There just aren't many international students here, which disappointed me a little bit...I think it would be attractive, the university, to me if there were more international students. (Out-of-state)

The campus is really weird because it's like 40 percent Asian and then there's this little, tiny group of black people and then a couple of others, and it's such a weird dynamic for me, the campus. (Out-of-state)

It was nice to have lots of different people than the people where I'm from...I liked meeting people with a different lifestyle but I agree, I think the diversity could be more.  
(Out-of-state)

*Observations/Recommendations:*

*Continue providing multiple opportunities for diverse students to come together and interact and profiling multiple aspects of diversity in marketing and recruitment materials.*

**Bureaucracy**

Students also expressed some negative views of UCLA, particularly with regard to perceptions that public schools in general are bogged down by bureaucracy and incompetent staff. Some of the ways that students saw bureaucracy manifested included poor/ineffective service, difficulty getting things done, and impersonal contact. International students reported particular concerns in corresponding with Admissions, most often in the area of their I-20 application process.

The emails were not the most promptly replied so that was a little bit of a hurdle for me.  
(International direct entry)

I remember sending an email but I was never replied to and things like that, but I remember being really frustrated with the UC system after I got admitted in terms of my Visa application or the shots...Contacting the office and the service and the promptness and the accuracy and everything was just very public school. It was very, very, very not well done and so I was very dissatisfied with that aspect. (International direct entry)

It was very unprofessional, very – I mean I'm sure they can hire more people, staff it better and plan it out better [referring to dealing with counseling regarding I-20].  
(International direct entry).

Also tied to obtaining I-20s was the difficulty international students faced when trying to attend summer orientation. Many international students felt that if they had been able to attend orientation that would have helped facilitate a smoother acclimation to UCLA and to US culture.

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Several international students also commented on the poor academic/course advising they received.

I think the advisor in orientation was not really professional so I get me so many mistake, the advice, and directing in the wrong direction and afterwards figure it out. (International direct entry)

I think that counselors also on the regular Orientation are a little bit insensitive to international students...They gave me advice that was really unhelpful and really harmful in my later academic career. (International direct entry)

**Observations/Recommendations:**

*Recently admitted international students appear to have a great need for information and having their questions/emails answered in a timely manner. Academic counseling for international students may need to be reviewed. Also, consider creating a special late summer session for incoming international students that would allow them to travel to the US to attend orientation and concurrently enroll in a unit-bearing course.*

**Perceptions of Nonresident Students as “Cash cows”**

International as well as out-of-state students recognized that because they pay nonresident fees and tuition, they bring in a substantial amount of money to UCLA. Thus, students had strong opinions about UCLA’s financial issues and the role that their enrollment plays in contributing to the budget. Some out-of-state students felt that UCLA is using them to compensate for budget gaps and to help balance the budget. Many expressed frustration with the high cost of tuition as well as recent and proposed tuition increases. Compounding the frustration of increasing fees and tuition, out-of-state students expressed dissatisfaction with the availability of financial aid and receiving inadequate help finding financial aid. Other students felt misled about their ability to pay reduced tuition or secure ongoing funding for their education. Financial issues weren’t unique to out-of-state students as several international students also echoed similar sentiments. However, their concerns were somewhat buffered by the fact that they had already had to demonstrate an ability to pay for their education as part of the visa application process.

It’s [tuition increases] especially bad for out of state students. (Out-of-state)

I don’t want it to become the type of thing where even if the involvement of out of state students is increasing, I don’t want it to become an issue where out of state students are covering the costs of the university’s problems. (Out-of-state)

Yeah, they pretty much lie to you about what it takes to be an in-state student...I even considered transferring to another school because of that financial reasons...I was under a very different impression when I came in about being able to get it in state. (Out-of-state)

The first year they give you a lot of scholarships and then they don’t give it to you again, so that you’re under this impression that you’re going to be getting that for four years, and you make your financial plans based off what they give you your first year, and then it comes to your second year, and they take away all your scholarship and they’re like “Screw you. Figure it out.” (Out-of-state)

I, like everyone else, I was under the impression once I get here, I can try and be an in state student. That didn’t work out. It’s like, okay, I’ll try for scholarships. There aren’t many, and if there are some, they’re really, really competitive. (Out-of-state)

I understand that these schools are for California, but they can’t just completely forget about us either... but I just felt like I wasn’t getting much help especially with financial aid. (Out-of-state)

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Things are always so difficult [for international students], and we play such a huge amount of money. (International direct entry)

Out-of-state students who perceive themselves as middle-class also expressed concerns that they did not want UCLA to enroll large numbers of wealthy out-of-state students who would change the character of the institution.

That's what's so frustrating. It's just like- it's almost as if UCLA expects all out of state students are rich...They don't remember that there's middle to low income families out of state as well and...it's just so frustrating. (Out-of-state)

I don't want it to become something where we are recruiting towards the upper class, out of state students, because then it's gonna change the entire dynamic of UCLA...I don't want it to become the cohort of kids who wouldn't attending private school. (Out-of-state)

Although many students, both out-of-state and international expressed concern and frustration about rising costs associated with attending UCLA, it was still promising to know that despite these financial stresses, students still appreciated the value of attending UCLA. As one student put it, "I complain about the financial stuff all the time, but I still enjoy coming here. I don't regret my decision" (Out-of-state).

**Observations/Recommendations:**

*Administrators should be especially aware during discussions of enrollment targets for nonresident students that emphasis should be placed on how nonresident students contribute to the diversity of the campus and not on how their fees are used to fill budget gaps.*

### **Experiences Within the UCLA Community**

Because they were living far away from their families, coming to UCLA forced many out-of-state and international students to be more proactive and take care of themselves. Attending a large institution like UCLA, students felt that they needed to take more personal responsibility. Many student comments reflected this perspective, but at the same time they appreciated the life lessons and skills that accompanied their increased responsibilities.

You can definitely have a great experience at UCLA...I think what's most important is that you need to be proactive is because it is such a big institution. (Out-of-state)

I had that perspective coming [that I had to be proactive] because I knew that UCLA was so large that I felt like you could get lost if you didn't do anything about it...I wanted that actually. (Out-of-state)

I think all out of state students already go with an expectation that we're gonna have to do a lot of searching on our own. (Out-of-state)

You have to figure out what you wanna do and how you're gonna do it, and if you figure that out and if you can go past the financial stuff, then yeah, this would be a good school for you. (Out-of-state)

Being in a large university, it's good because it forces you to go out and do things versus people just, "Oh, here. Here you go. Here are some useful things." (Out-of-state)

Due to their distance from their families, making connections to the UCLA community is often even more salient for non-resident students. Focus group participants pointed out some of the struggles they had in

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navigating the community. For example, students mentioned the loneliness of living in residence halls where so many students go home for weekends. The negative impact of the housing situation was evident in students' comments.

Not only was I stuck with people who didn't wanna socialize with a freshman but also people who went home for the weekend, so it was the worst of all situations.

(International direct entry)

Yeah, go home for the weekends, our underlying issue, we cannot do that, and people should stop doing that. (International direct entry)

UCLA has increased the visibility of its commitment to serving the community with the incorporation of Volunteer Day in UCLA's welcome week activities. Some students recognized this, but others felt that the university should be doing more to engage students in making a difference in the surrounding communities.

UCLA does care about its community, even though we are between Beverly Hills and Bel Air, they still try to make a difference. (Out-of-state)

I think UCLA is a lot more insulated of a community than I expected, and there's a lot of stuff going on campus, which is awesome but it would be nice to see a little bit more integration with the community. (Out-of-state)

Transportation around Los Angeles was mentioned as a challenge to many non-resident students. Students mentioned a need for more help understanding and using alternative transportation options such as public transportation.

I don't have a car and I don't live on campus so that [transportation] was a big thing. (Out-of-state)

When you're coming here, you need to be prepared for that, either you need to have a car or make a lot of friends with cars. (Out-of-state)

Public transportation in Los Angeles is terrible. (Out-of-state)

*Observations/Recommendations:*

*Continue to be aware of nonresidents' special needs for support services, advising, counseling, etc. because they often may not be able to rely on nearby family support.*

*Consider taking into account students' home location and year in school in housing assignments so they do not end up isolated on weekends.*

*Make sure that non-resident students are provided information regarding campus volunteer opportunities.*

*Provide more information regarding public transportation options, especially around the LA County area.*

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## Appendix

### Non-Resident Focus Group Interview Guide

**Tell us a little about how you made the decision to apply to UCLA. What things influenced your decision?**

*What information did they get, where did they get it, what was important/useful?*

Other people: parents, friends, counselors, college events

How about other students from your school—do you know if they considered UCLA?

Why/Why not

UCLA materials

web/print/facebook

Were there things you wanted to know but couldn't find?

Campus "features"

Location, amenities, athletics

Student population

Academic excellence/opportunities

Reputation of UCLA?/perceptions

Personal factors/concerns to overcome personally?

Finances

**Once you were admitted, were there things UCLA did that further influenced your decision to attend?**

Visit to campus

Yield events

Contact from students/faculty/alumni

Print/electronic materials

Was there any contact/information you received that was particularly meaningful/salient?

Did you compare UCLA to other institutions (which ones)? If so, what kind of things did you consider?

**Now that you are here and have experienced UCLA, what advice and information would you give to a student like yourself who is thinking about attending UCLA?**

Things you wish you had known?

Best/worst things about UCLA?

Perceptions of UCLA before versus now?