UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-DAVIS

Founded in 1905, the University of California-Davis (UC-Davis) is the second-oldest university in the University of California system (after UC-Berkeley). UC-Davis also has the second-largest undergraduate student body in the system, around 27,000 total, after UCLA. UC-Davis is the Golden State’s Land Grant university; it is the designated center for agricultural education in California. UC-Davis has four colleges: Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Biological Sciences, Engineering and Letters and Sciences.

According to College Results Online, approximately one-third of all bachelor’s degrees at UC-Davis are granted in the sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. The agricultural programs were rated first in the world by QS World University Rankings, second in the world in U.S. News Global Universities Rankings. The engineering programs were ranked 30th in the world for employability of graduates by Business Insider. Interestingly, while the University does not have an undergraduate business school—it has a graduate school of management on campus—Managerial Economics, offered in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, is one of the most popular majors. So is the Economics major offered in the College of Letters and Sciences.

Admissions to UC-Davis have become increasingly selective. Two years ago, according to College Results Online, the University accepted nearly half (48 percent) of its applicants to the freshman class. Last year the acceptance rate dropped to 41 percent. This past year, according to the admissions office, it was closer to 35 percent. The SAT range for the middle 50 percent of the class that entered in 2014 was between 1180 and 1440. The ACT range was between 27 and 32. This year UC-Davis offered “second-choice” options to applicants who did not get into the college they chose within the University. Applicants who considered UC-Davis considered UC-Berkeley, UC-Irvine and UC-Santa Barbara most often among the system campuses. The University also offered admission to more than half of the interested students who applied to transfer in 2014. Unlike many other schools, UC-Davis requires that transfer students complete 60 credits before they can enroll.

UC-Davis does an excellent job of retaining a freshman class. More than 90 percent of the admitted freshmen have returned for their sophomore year each year since 1994, according to the University’s Office of Institutional Analysis. Ninety-three percent of the students who entered in 2012 and 2013 returned.

Graduation rates have improved dramatically over the past two decades. According to the University’s Office of Institutional Analysis, less than a third of the students who entered in 1994 graduated within four years. However, 55 percent of the students who entered in 2010 finished on time.

Combined together, UC-Davis’ freshman retention and four-year graduation rates place the school among the best public universities in the U.S. UC-Davis has most recently outperformed the flagship state university in 39 states outside of California in retaining and graduating a freshman class. The numbers are more impressive when considering
that so many students major in a STEM subject. As one comparison, Purdue, which has a similar percentage of STEM students as well as a strong agricultural school, graduates less that half of a freshman class on time.

Most students who apply and attend UC-Davis come from California, though the University has scholarships targeted at students who come from Oregon as well as Washington State. The University has ramped up its marketing efforts to further diversify the student body, to increase the numbers of African American and Hispanic students on campus.

It helps that the University of California system has a simple application process. Students self report grades and complete two essays, limited to 1,000 words total for both. In addition, UC-Davis does not ask for letters of recommendation.

However the school does ask applicants to choose a major. This is required for the College of Engineering, which offers no option to be undeclared. UC-Davis is even specific when it comes to allowing students to apply undeclared within the College of Letters and Science. They must choose between Undeclared Humanities, Undeclared Social Sciences, Undeclared Fine Arts and Undeclared Physical Sciences

There is no Early Decision or Early Action option, nor do applicants rank the UC schools in order of preference. All applications must be in by November 30th. Admissions decisions are rendered at the end of March, though the school did go to the wait list to offer admission to students in the incoming freshman class.

**Costs**

UC-Davis a great value for California residents. Not only are the in-state tuition and fees reasonable—less than $14,000 for 2015-16—the state also has some of the more generous scholarship programs for economically-disadvantaged students in the country.

Families who qualify for assistance under the Blue and Gold Plan (income less than $80,000) pay no tuition at all. The Middle Class Access Plan limits costs (tuition and fees, room and board) to 15 percent of their total income when their total income is between $80,000 and $150,000. These families, in effect, get a discount of at least $10,000 to go to University of California schools before jobs and student loans are considered. In addition, the smallest merit-based Regents Awards ($7,500) are larger than those offered by UCLA, UC-Santa Barbara and UC-San Diego.

Because of these programs, the Federal Pell Grant—nearly 40 percent of the students qualified—as well as Division I athletic scholarships, UC-Davis was able to fulfill, on average 81 percent of the need for incoming freshmen as well as 78 percent of the need for the full undergraduate student body, according to the university’s Office of Institutional Analysis. This is very good for any research university, public or private.

For non-residents the University will charge close to $39,000. Outside of California only the College of William and Mary, Michigan State University, the University of Michigan, the University of Virginia and the University of Vermont charge more. However, these
schools have a much longer history of welcoming students from other states as well as more options for need-based and merit-based awards.

Non-residents can qualify for assistance under the Middle Class Access plan. However, the discount is not applied to the non-resident portion of tuition and fees, which is approximately $24,000. One tip: provide proof of health insurance early. Otherwise you will be asked to pay a $2,250 insurance fee to buy a policy from the school. This is part of the $39,000 price tag.

Because of the high direct charges (tuition and fees, room and board), the value of UC-Davis for a non-resident is likely to be based more on major—especially in agricultural or STEM subjects—or fit with a student's interests in a university community.

The University markets that 43 percent of recent graduated completed their degrees with no debt at all. The Project on Student Debt nearly confirms this for the class that graduated in 2013. It reported that 58 percent of the graduates in the Class of 2013 took out student loans, meaning that 42 percent had no student loan dept. Only 11 percent had to borrow from a source other than the Federal Government. The average indebtedness of student borrowers was just under $20,000, excellent for any college, public or private. The low level of indebtedness is no surprise, given that more than 90 percent of the students come from California and so many of them qualified for need-based aid from Federal or state sources.

Curriculum

UC-Davis operates on a quarter system. Students take three or four courses per quarter depending on their major and the number of credits (between 3 and 5) in a course. The quarter system also means that students finish a school year in June as opposed to late April or early May and therefore have less time to work during the summer. However, they get to take two additional courses (12 versus 10) over the school year if they carry a four-course load.

Academic advising and tutoring are readily available at UC-Davis, important because the introductory courses in the more popular subjects (Biology, Chemistry, Economics, Physics and Psychology) will be very large lecture classes with a teaching assistant leading the recitation and lab sections. The university also had subject specialists who will teach workshops in these introductory courses teams, aligning their content with the academic course.

The University advertises a student-faculty ratio of 17 to 1, lower than the ratio at UC-Berkeley. However, nearly a third of the undergrad courses offered in 2013-14 enrolled more than 40 students, according to the University’s 2014-15 Common Data set. Sixteen percent enrolled more than 100, a high percentage, even for a large public university. However, the admissions marketing material mentions that 70 percent of UC-Davis students engage in research, including funded and mentored projects, with the faculty.

The depth of the offerings in Agriculture as well as the Biological Sciences is tremendous. There are choices, for example, between Animal Biology and Animal Science and Management; Environmental Horticulture and Urban Forestry,
Environmental Policy Analysis and Planning and Environmental Science and Management. Students interested in Biology can study Global Disease Biology as a major; Genetics and Genomics; Evolution, Ecology and Biodiversity and Neurobiology, Physiology and Behavior, among other choices. There is also a major in Viticulture for students interested in wine making.

There are also some unique options within the College of Letters and Sciences including three concentrations within the Math major and three within Chemistry. This college also offers a unique major in Chicana/Chicano Studies. There is also a Public Service option within the Political Science major as well an Organizational Studies option within the Sociology major. There are more than 50 minors that you are not likely to find at most large universities, too many to list on a profile. Given the university's location near Sacramento, students interested in public policy and politics have more opportunities to gain work experience than they would if they were enrolled at any other University of California campus. The University also runs a program that matches students with internships in Washington D.C.

UC-Davis students gave their faculty an average rating of 3.75 (out of a possible 5.00) on RateMyProfessors.com. Among the University of California campuses, only UC-Merced students rated their faculty significantly higher (3.89). Only UC-San Diego students rated their faculty significantly lower (3.65).

Comforts

On-campus housing at UC-Davis is very nice and quite modern, but also quite limited. UC-Davis provides housing for 4,900 students, less than a fifth of the undergraduate population. On-campus housing will cost approximately $14,700 in 2015-16, on the high end for a room in a college residence hall combined with a meal plan.

The University guarantees housing to all first-year students as well as one year of housing for incoming transfer students. Sophomores are not likely to live in the residence halls, though they have a reasonable chance of getting housing in university-owned apartments. There are fraternities and sororities at UC-Davis though the University does not report the percentage of students who belong to them. The campus was the first location for an MTV program, Sorority Life.

The admissions marketing material mentions that 94 percent of the student body lives on campus or within four miles from campus. The University maintains a Web-based community board to help students find off-campus housing. Rentals posted ranged from $500 to $915 per person per month plus utilities in apartments, houses and town homes. This is quite reasonable for a large college town, let alone one in California. It also means that “college town” comprises campus and community versus a campus walled off from the community.

Off-campus housing is the more attractive option for sophomores, juniors and seniors. The prices are more reasonable than they are for university housing, though continuing and transfer students should look for options that do not force them to sublet during the summer months. While Davis is a very nice college town, and the campus offers
summer classes, students from California are more likely to go home if they live closer to one of the larger cities in the state.

Community

While the UC-Davis campus has been open since 1905, most of the architecture dates back 50 years or less. The Memorial Union is really the signature building, originating from a farm silo that was one of the first buildings on campus. The main quad was once the parade ground for livestock shows. The path that passes in front of the University’s student affairs offices, and most of the oldest buildings, was the main thoroughfare for cars, trucks and animals in the parades. The university has won numerous awards sustainability for its newest buildings and environmentally-related programs. There are 265 days of sunshine in Davis, according to the admissions marketing material, which makes for a well-landscaped campus, including a 100-acre arboretum for research and recreation. The university also harvests olives from its older trees to harvest olive oil.

Davis is the least urban of the UC campuses outside of UC-Merced, which has a fifth as many undergraduates. The campus is the major destination for those who come, as opposed to the city where the campus is located. But given the high percentage of students who live off campus and the lower profile of the athletic programs, there is not the bonded “spirit and sports” atmosphere that is found at a PAC-12 school.

UC-Davis competes in 23 varsity sports at the NCAA Division I (scholarship) level. It is one of only three UC campuses (besides UCLA and UC-Berkeley) to field a football team. The current stadium opened in 2007 with 11,000 seats, with the opportunity to expand to 30,000. The Pavilion, which hosts basketball, among other sports, hosts about 8,000 fans. Since moving to Division I competition (playoff series in football), the most notable accomplishment was a 20-17 upset over Stanford in 2005. The Aggies also beat Stanford in basketball, baseball, soccer and wrestling during the same school year.

Reported incidents of crime are low at UC-Davis considering the size of the undergraduate population, and that most of the students live on or immediately near campus. Drug-related arrests dropped from 13 in 2011 to only 1 in 2013, according to the University’s Clery Report. There were also no more than 53 alcohol-related arrests in a year during this period. Drug-related disciplinary actions dropped from 67 to only 19. Those related to alcohol dropped from 256 to 1. While forcible sex crimes as well as burglaries have also trended downward, the number of reported incidents was high, even for a school of this size. There were 22 reported forcible sex offenses in 2011, then 14 in 2013. There were 79 reported burglaries in campus, down to 40 two years later. The question: is this a result of better reporting and law enforcement, or more crime?

Davis is everything that anyone could expect a college town to be when it is host to a large state university, except that it does not have the traffic congestion and crowds that similar towns have on football weekends. The downtown is lined with over 90 student-oriented eating and drinking places and retail shopping as well as two multiplex movie theaters. Most of the retail shops and restaurants are run by local entrepreneurs, as opposed to being chain stores. Given that faculty also live in the community, the local economy can sustain a diverse mix of dining and shopping options.
In Davis, downtown and campus combine to be one of the most pedestrian-friendly as well as bicycle-friendly college communities in the U.S. There are more than 100 miles of bike paths in the community. Bus service is excellent and plentiful, including double-decker Unitarians buses operated by the school. There is also CalTrans train service to San Francisco as well as Sacramento, the state capital. There is no reason for students to have cars at UC-Davis, though parking for on-campus is decent, given the size of the student body.

Davis is located in California’s Central Valley, but not immediately near any larger city. Davis is approximately an hour and a half from San Francisco, a half hour from Sacramento, just under an hour from the Napa Valley, Wine Country, and slightly more than two hours from Tahoe. It might not be necessary to have a car to get around Davis, but it is helpful to have access to one to get away from campus. The Central Valley is the agricultural region of the state. It is known as the Golden State’s “almond country,” among other agricultural distinctions. The University is a major partner in efforts to attract new industry as well as keep bright young people from moving away. And it is the region’s major tourist destination.

Connections

UC-Davis has more than 230,000 living alumni, more than many flagship state schools in smaller states. Among the nearly 137,000 registered on LinkedIn.com, over half live in either the San Francisco or Sacramento metropolitan areas. Outside of California, the largest concentration live in or around New York City. But they represent little more than 2,200 alumni. The University is the major institution in California’s Central Valley, important to regional economic development. It is a catalyst for Central Valley Scholars, a program that combines tuition assistance, mentoring, career advising and access to internship opportunities for resident students as well as those who would like to remain in the area after graduation.

Unlike UCLA and UC-Berkeley, it is harder to knock on doors from Davis to seek employment in a larger city, though alumni have found tremendous at finding work. Genentech, Kaiser Permanente, Google and Apple are the five largest employers of UC-Davis alumni on LinkedIn. Another exceptional example, over 900 students work at the UC Medical Center each quarter in hospitals and clinics. UC-Davis was also the second most recruited school for yelp.com, the recommendation site. It is also helpful that the University has all of its graduate divisions on campus, including the Law School, Graduate School of Education, Graduate School of Management, the medical school and the veterinary school to provide exposure to academic and possible employment options.

Over 15,000 positions were posted for UC-Davis students during the 2014-15 school year, excluding student employment, according to the University’s Internship and Career Center. Forty percent of the most recent graduating class is continuing their education full time, high for any college, large or small, public or private. The Internship and Career Center hosts Internship and Job Fairs during the Fall, Winter and Spring quarters as well as an Engineering fair in the winter. On average these events attract more than 2,000 students. The Center offers a Winter career development course that draws 200
students into 10 sections to work on assessments and career research. It also coordinates a Career Discovery Group with cohorts of 20 to 25 students in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Science.

The University does an excellent job at student-alumni relations through a buddy program; Aggie Diner, a fall quarter dinner program; job shadowing; and, mock interviews with alumni in student fields of interest. The Student-Alumni Association also challenges students to participate in each of 50 Aggie Traditions. They receive a special medallion at graduation.

UC-Davis also does an impressive job at parent relations from within its alumni relations function. A full-time professional, as well as four students in the schools various majors, team up to answer parent questions and solve problems when empowered. This is a valuable service for a large school where students have the feeling, due to the location and campus layout, that they are truly going away to a college in a college town. The most common parent questions deal with access to grades, campus safety, progress towards degrees, tutoring and health insurance. The parent relations function with health insurance is a cost issue. Students must present proof that they are on their parent's insurance or pay a $2,250/year insurance fee on their term bill. The office reports that 80 percent of the families of accepted students who visit after receiving their offer of admission decide to enroll.

Conclusion

If someone says that UC-Davis is one of the best state universities in the U.S. you should not argue. The academic breadth of the school as well as the performance of the students would easily support this contention. Davis is also a very nice college town, though the community is not as “sports and spirit” oriented as one might find of schools that have approximately the same number of students. The academic performance of the student body is excellent. This university does a better job than most flagships at graduating students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

UC-Davis actually has more students than UC-Berkeley, though they go to school on a far less crowded campus. The academic climate, however, may be just as competitive and pressure packed as it is at the older, and more famous, university. The student who can get into the more famous institutions in the UC system, UC-Berkeley and UCLA, does not receive significantly more benefits over the student who goes to UC-Davis, other than stronger brand recognition and athletic teams that have a higher profile. Students who perform well at Davis can accomplish the same things as they would at the more selective UC schools. Not to mention that UC schools are a great value for the California residents who get in.

Aside from the lack of an undergraduate business or education school, surprising given that the University has graduate schools in these areas, there are no serious downsides to UC-Davis for a Californian who wants to attend a large public university. The decision between UC-Davis and another UC campus is based not only on where a student gets accepted; it's also a decision between an urban or rural setting. This might be a more appealing option for a student from Northern California as opposed to the southern
counties of the state. The alumni base is far stronger in the Bay Area than it is anywhere else, even in the counties closest to the campus.

But UC-Davis is a more expensive option for non-residents than most other state schools, unless they want one of the unique majors within agriculture or the sciences. A non-resident student who had the choice between studying these subjects at UC-Davis or Cornell, New York's Land Grant University, might actually end up paying less to go to Cornell—and Cornell has the more "national" student body.

Those who could not get into Cornell for these programs could pay a premium of more than $10,000 a year to choose UC-Davis over other fine Land Grant universities such as Penn State, Wisconsin or Purdue for the privilege of going to college in California. If costs, especially debt, are a concern, then the premium might be beyond reach.

Ed Quest’s Report Card: University of California-Davis

- 4-Year/6-Year Graduation Rates: A/A
- Freshman Retention: A
- Costs: A for California residents, C for Non-Residents
- Curriculum: A
- Comforts: B+
- Community: A
- Connections: A