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University of California-Berkeley: The Harvard of the Publics?

So many schools are called “The Harvard of” somewhere. Among them is the University of California-Berkeley (UC-Berkeley), founded nearly two centuries after Harvard opened its doors. Among the intentions of Berkeley’s founders was to attract East Coast scholars westward. This tradition continues into today. Robert Reich, for example, former Secretary of Labor under President Bill Clinton, is one such transplant from Harvard’s halls. In addition, UC-Berkeley has 29 graduates who became Nobel Laureates, more than any other public university in the United States. Only MIT has produced more Sloan Research Fellows since 2000. Nearly 1,300 graduates received National Science Foundation fellowships from 2004 through 2013, more than any other U.S. college or university. Eight elements of the Periodic Table in Chemistry, including Berkelium, were invented here. This is only a partial list of laudatory successes.

Students admitted to UC-Berkeley had the grades and test scores to qualify for admission to exceptionally selective private universities. The SAT range for those who entered in 2014 was between 1270 and 1510 (out of 1600). The ACT range was between 29 and 34. The average unweighted GPA was close to 3.9. UC-Berkeley offered admission to less than a fifth (18 percent) of the students who applied to enter in the Fall of 2014. This year the admissions office accepted around 15 percent of the students who applied.

The admission process is very simple, which partly explains why UC-Berkeley received nearly 74,000 applications for the freshman class of approximately 5,600 students who entered in 2014. Applicants complete the University of California system online application, checking one undergraduate college (Chemistry, Engineering, Environmental Design, Letters and Sciences or Natural Resources) within UC-Berkeley as one of their seven choices. Applicants *must* identify the college where they want to enroll, though they may enter that college undecided on a major. There are only two essay questions; the answers to both may *total* no more than 1,000 words. There is no Early Action or Early Decision. Everyone must have their application in by November 30th. Students receive their decision beginning March 29th, Cesar Chavez Day.

The ease of the application process—it’s very easy to check off UC-Berkeley as a “reach” school—as well as the lack of a “second choice” option for students who do not get into the undergraduate college that is their first choice make UC-Berkeley appear to be far more selective than other flagship state universities of similar size such as the University of Michigan and the University of Maryland-College Park.

The process is considered to be holistic, and you can plead a case to try reverse a denial. Low test scores will not necessarily rule someone out if their accomplishments and the strength of their essays outweigh them. But as the competition increases—the number of applications has more than doubled since 2004 while the number of seats in a freshman class has remained essentially the same—high scores become more important. [Over half of the freshman who entered in 2014 who took the SAT scored over 700 \(out of 800\) on the Math section of the test.](#)

Costs

No “Harvard of” from anyplace can hope to duplicate Harvard, especially a public university that is part of a much larger system that has obligations to the citizens of its state to keep costs down. [Seven years ago, the Regents of this system raised tuition and fees by 32 percent.](#) However,



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tuition and fees have remained about the same (just under \$13,000 for California residents, slightly less than \$36,000 for non-residents) from the 2011-12 academic year to the current one. [Resident tuition will be frozen for another two years.](#) It is important for entering freshmen to have proof of health insurance when they enroll. [Otherwise, they must purchase health insurance from the University at a cost of over \\$3,000 per year.](#)

UC-Berkeley is a tremendous value for California residents, even if they have to pay the sticker price. As a result, 80 percent of the student body comes from the Golden State; the remainder is split evenly between international students and residents of other U.S. states. California residents who come from families documented as earning less than \$80,000 pay no tuition and fees per the system-wide [Blue and Gold Plan](#). The state's [Middle Class Access Plan](#) caps a family's costs at 15 percent of their total income when their total income is between \$80,000 and \$150,000. Such 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. [This past year nearly 4,000 undergraduates were assisted this way.](#) In addition, more than a third of UC-Berkeley undergraduates qualify for Federal Pell Grants; these are typically awarded to students who come from families earning less than \$50,000. California also has its own state scholarship programs to assist college students. [Because of the generous aid programs, as well as the high percentage of California residents, less than half the students who graduated in 2013 had any student loan debt; the average student borrower borrowed less than \\$18,000, according the Project on Student Debt.](#)

UC-Berkeley's non-resident charges are extraordinary high for a state university. Among flagships of similar reputation only the University of Michigan, University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary charge more. Non-residents are eligible for the Middle Class Access Plan, but they may not receive any scholarships to cover the "non-resident supplement," [which will be slightly more than \\$24,000 for the 2015-16 academic year.](#) A non-resident family earning \$80,000 would be expected to pay approximately \$12,000 towards the costs of a UC-Berkeley education, *plus the supplement*, a total of \$36,000 before loans, institutional scholarships, Pell Grants and jobs are considered. This is close to the in-state charges at most flagship public universities. Needless to say the non-residents who are most likely to go to UC-Berkeley will be those who come families who are unlikely to qualify for need-based aid at most colleges and universities.

Residents and non-residents alike are also asked to pay some of the highest room and board charges in the country. [It costs no less than \\$14,700 for a standard double room and meal plan for the upcoming academic year.](#)

Curriculum

UC-Berkeley expects all students to choose an undergraduate division (Chemistry, Engineering, Environmental Design, Letters and Science, Natural Resources) when they apply. There is little reason to discuss the "high rankings" of the academic programs. They have been exceptionally well publicized by the University as well as sources such as *U.S. News*. The choices among majors are exceptional. The [liberal arts requirements](#) are quite similar to those at other large universities.

Unlike most large public universities, UC-Berkeley does not allow freshmen to enroll directly into their business school. Those interested in Business are advised to check off Undeclared—Pre-Business Administration as their major. The undergraduate program is a general business degree with concentrations (Accounting, Business Communication, Finance, Marketing and Organizational Behavior) instead of majors. It's difficult to earn credits towards a business minor



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beyond the introductory courses; those enrolled in the business school have priority for the advanced coursework in the concentrations.

Students should expect to see large enrollments in the introductory courses in the popular majors. Last year UC Berkeley offered over 3,400 undergraduate courses, according to its 2014-15 Common Data Set. Fifteen percent of these courses enrolled more than 50 students, high for even a large state university. However, 59 percent of these classes had fewer than 20 students. This may be a school where students who declare one of the less popular majors will receive a far more personal experience than those who declare one of the most popular majors such as the Biological Sciences or Engineering.

UC-Berkeley students gave their faculty a rating of 3.78 (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). Students at Stanford (3.93) held their faculty in higher regard than UC-Berkeley students held theirs as did students at Northwestern and Rice. Students at the University of Southern California regarded their faculty equally as did students at Cornell.

Community

The UC-Berkeley campus has over 1,000 acres. Only 170 acres make up the “core campus” frequented by students. The core campus, while small for a large (35,000+ students) public university, appears larger because it is situated on a hill over the surrounding community.

The University has done an excellent job at preserving the exteriors of its most historic buildings such as Sproul Hall, as well as landmarks such as Sather Gate and the Sather Campanile. But the interiors of academic and administrative buildings are showing their age, as is the main sports arena. In addition, there are state universities of far less academic distinction that have more impressive facilities to welcome prospective students. A new student center is currently under construction; it could be the large box that the previous one came in.

What makes UC-Berkeley special is not buildings, but activity. Student tables in Sproul Plaza, near Sather Gate, the main entrance to the campus, are a long-standing tradition. There are over 1,200 student organizations at the University, including clubs and organizations built around all cultural, political and social viewpoints; anyone can find their niche. A walk around campus would show anyone that no serious intellectual or social interest is discouraged. The campus life, as well as its legendary entrance off Bancroft Avenue, has evolved from more than a half-century of commitment to discourse and free speech. Undergraduate students even teach one-credit classes, under “DeCal,” that can be applied towards a degree.

While UC-Berkeley competes in athletics in the PAC-12, and recruits some of the best student-athletes in the world, it is not a “spirit and sports” school along the lines of Oregon or Southern Cal. This past football season, a losing campaign, [UC-Berkeley drew less than 48,000 fans per home game, according to the NCAA. Only Colorado, which had a poorer season and Utah drew worse. Only the University of Washington, among conference rivals, averaged fewer fans per game in men’s basketball, also according to the NCAA.](#) While campus life does not need to ebb and flow over the records of the teams in the major revenue sports, there are schools such as Ohio State and Penn State where fans turn out in droves for any season, good or bad. UC-Berkeley is not one of those schools.

Being an urban campus, as well as a large public university, UC-Berkeley has more incidents of some crimes than schools in more isolated places. [For example, one murder was reported for](#)



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[2013 on the University's most recent Clery Report. Most schools report none. There were 30 arrests on campus related to Weapons in 2013. Most schools report none. There were 13 reported incidents of forcible sexual assault in 2012 as well as 2013, down from 31 in 2011. This is high for any school of any size. However, reported arrests and disciplinary referrals for alcohol-related crimes trended dramatically downward during these three years. There were 159 alcohol-related arrests as well as 289 referrals in 2011. By 2013 these numbers dropped to 63 and 16.](#)

With approximately 112,000 residents, including the students, [Berkeley is only the 31st largest city in California—its not even the largest city in its home county.](#) But the neighborhood immediately surrounding campus off Telegraph Avenue has an “urban-bohemian” feel. Shops and restaurants lean towards the entrepreneurial and student-oriented. There are chain restaurants, though none are among the global fast food variety. Walking towards the BART station brings you closer to the shops and restaurants that you would find in a more adult-residential urban neighborhood. There is tremendous wealth in Berkeley, as well as aesthetic beauty, throughout the city, [but the crime rates are surprisingly high.](#)

Mass transit into San Francisco and Oakland is plentiful and inexpensive. AC Transit bus service and Bear Transit campus buses to get around Berkeley are free for students who present a Class Pass, available from the University, to the driver. This is a community where students are better off without a car. Parking on this urban campus is limited and tight. Off-campus lots charge more (\$9 a day off Telegraph Avenue) than students could be expected to afford.

Comforts

UC-Berkeley is unique in that first-year students are not required to live in on-campus housing, although 95 percent of them choose to do so, according to the University's 2014-15 Common Data Set. Technically, university housing is off campus. None of the residence halls are located on the core campus near the major academic, administrative athletic and community buildings.

The University offers corridor-style (several rooms sharing a common bathroom) and suite-style living options (two or more rooms sharing a common lounge and bathroom as well as a separate entrance off the floor) for first-year students. Stern Hall, is an all-female building. Foothill Hall is closest to the Engineering buildings.

Everyone who lives in a residence hall must purchase a meal plan. Meal plans are based on a point system. Each point is worth a dollar. Breakfasts will be worth seven points, lunches eight. Students are allowed to roll over up to 100 points between the fall and winter and the winter and spring quarters.

However, nearly 75 percent of all undergraduates do not live on campus. Greek life is not overly popular. Less than 10 percent of the undergraduates belong to a fraternity or sorority. The most likely living options are apartments or houses in the community. The key is to find one within walking distance or close to an AC Transit bus line. The University provides access to a secure database of available off-campus rental properties. Rents advertised outside the database went beyond \$1,000 per person per month

Connections

UC-Berkeley's career center is excellent with more resources than most diligent students would ever have time to use. Of special interest there are more than 15 internship and career fairs on campus as well as Spring Break Employer Trips *and* Externships. Over 900 employers in the job



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and internship fairs held last year. This is one of the few schools that hosts internship fairs during the Fall *and* the Spring.

Among the more than 284,000 UC-Berkeley alumni registered in [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com), approximately 132,000 (46 percent) work in or around the San Francisco Bay Area. Approximately 32,000 live in or around Los Angeles and Orange County. New York City ranks fourth; over 11,400 work in or around there. Thirteen percent of UC-Berkeley alumni made a contribution to their alma mater in 2011-12 and 2012-13, according to the 2015 *U.S. News Best Colleges* guide. Only UCLA ranked lower among the research universities ranked in the magazine's top 25. For contrast 19 percent of University of Michigan alumni made a contribution to support their alma mater.

Conclusions

UC-Berkeley appears to meet the ideal of “fulfilling the American Dream” for exceptionally bright young Californians. The academic community, faculty and graduates, of UC-Berkeley is certainly quite similar to the community of an Ivy League school, at a very fair price for California residents. The UC-Berkeley degree opens the same doors as an Ivy, too. In addition, an Ivy League school or similarly-selective university is not likely to discount tuition and fees to UC-Berkeley's charges for anyone but the neediest of students. Further, UC-Berkeley is on the semester system. The academic pace will be slower than it is likely to be at UCLA or Stanford, which operate on a quarter system. And the area is very easy to get around by mass transit.

But a non-resident who presents the accomplishments necessary to qualify for admission could find private universities that are more likely to award financial aid while having a much smaller undergraduate student body. Through the non-resident supplement and high room and board charges, UC-Berkeley is, in effect, asking non-residents to pay a premium for going to college in the San Francisco Bay Area versus many other college towns, and the living costs are very high.

A non-resident intent on going to college in this region who has a stellar record of a achievements has essentially three educational options: the University of Santa Clara, Stanford and UC-Berkeley, depending on their academic interests, or s/he could choose UC-Davis, which is located in the Central Valley less than two hours away. Those interested in computer science or engineering could conceivably consider all four schools. Those admitted could successfully find internships as well as full-time employment in San Francisco or Silicon Valley, regardless of which one they chose. Stanford charges no tuition to families earning \$125,000 or less, while practicing need-blind admissions. It will be the better value over UC-Berkeley, for those who can get admitted. The University of Santa Clara charged approximately \$43,000 in tuition and fees in 2014-15, around \$7,000 more than UC-Berkeley. However, that private school also charged around \$2,000 less than the state university does for room and board. [Those who qualify to be Johnson Scholars, Santa Clara's largest merit-based award, would pay nothing for tuition and fees or room and board for four years, if they maintain academic excellence.](#) Such students are likely to be in the middle of UC-Berkeley's applicant pool.

If you're a California resident with an impressive set of achievements, academic and non-academic, by all means consider UC-Berkeley if you want a large research university and you do not want to leave the state for college. It's a big, bureaucratic place. But it does deliver on its promises with respects to academics, student activities and career opportunities.

If you're a non-resident who is similarly qualified, and you want to move to Northern California, you might want to save your money on the undergraduate experience. Put the savings towards going to graduate or professional school at UC-Berkeley after your college days are done. Unless you can get into Stanford.



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Ed Quest's Report Card: University of California-Berkeley

- Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: A/A
- Freshman Retention: A
- Costs: California Residents: A/Non-Residents: C
- Comforts: C+
- Community: A
- Curriculum: A
- Connections: A