

UCSC Admission: History and Opportunities

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The Santa Cruz campus has an extraordinary admission history. We believe it is important that faculty members understand and come to terms with this history, so that we can move forward and deal with the disquieting trends that have emerged over the last three decades.

To explore the admissions history, we obtained SAT data for 1968-1998ⁱ. In the separate file entitled "SAT Graphs" are three graphs showing total, verbal, and math SAT scores for all eight UC undergraduate campuses over the period 1970 to 1998ⁱⁱ.

We summarize here some preliminary analysis based on these graphs and additional data obtained from the University Director of Admissions:

- **Incoming UCSC students had the highest total SAT scores in the UC system from 1968-1974, the highest verbal SAT scores from 1968 to 1978, and the highest math SAT scores from 1968 to 1972.** Thus, for approximately a decade, the SAT scores of UCSC students were the highest in the UC system.
- **The SAT scores of UCSC students declined precipitously after 1973.** Note that the differential between UCSC and the other campuses changed much more drastically in the math SATs than in the verbal SATs. Table I provides a comparison of the rankings of the UC campuses for the "quality of undergraduate education" compiled by US News & World Report in their college survey, with the rankings of the same campuses based on math and verbal SAT scores of incoming students. Note the close correspondence between UC rankings in the US News survey and UC rankings based on the math SAT scores of incoming students. UCSC is ranked 8th in the system by US News and 7th in the system based on math SAT scores.

Ranking

SOURCE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
US News	UCB	UCLA	UCSD	UCD	UCSB	UCI	UCR	UCSC
MATH	UCB	UCLA	UCSD	UCD	UCSB	UCI	UCSC	UCR
SAT								
Verbal	UCB	UCLA	UCSD	UCSC/UCSB	UCSC/UCSB	UCD	UCI	UCR
SAT								

Table 1. Comparison of ranking of UC campuses by US News & World Report

(<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/corank.htm>) and by SAT scores.

- **In sharp contrast to UCSC, three campuses, UCB, UCLA and UCSD, show major improvements in their SAT scores during the last 15 years.** The result of these trends was that beginning around 1984 the UC undergraduate system began to split into three distinct groups: the **first tier** (UCB, UCLA, and UCSD), the **second tier** (UCI, UCD, and UCSB), and the **third tier** (UCSC and UCR). UCSC's low ranking is well known throughout the state. High school counselors routinely advise their best students not to attend UCSC, and this lesson has been well absorbed by prospective students and their parents. If nothing is done to change our low math SAT ranking, our low status in the UC system is likely to continue.

On the bright side, the SAT data show that it is possible for the SAT scores of a campus to improve dramatically over fairly short periods of time. Thus, we should be encouraged that change is possible, and there is no reason to accept our position at the bottom of the UC system as inevitable. We were first in the system once. We can be first again. But to make this happen we must understand what caused the decline from 1970 to 1978.ⁱⁱⁱ

We do not pretend to have definitive answers, but we offer the following possible explanation of the decline in our SAT scores. During the 1960s, UCSC resonated with the ethos of the times as did no other UC campus. The NES, with its rejection of competition, was one of several counter culture-inspired features of the campus that appealed to the best students in the state and nation. However, beginning in the 1970s many students became more goal-oriented. The best of them were attracted to campuses that seemed more competitive. At the same time, the University treated UCSC as just another UC campus. Funding for education effectively diminished. The lack of heavy research funding and the adjustment to UC-wide student-faculty ratios created pressures on standards and teaching practices that took a heavy toll. Inevitably, our ranking nationally and within UC declined and admissions suffered, especially in the competition for science-oriented students.

We acknowledge, of course, that colleagues will have different interpretations of the same events. And we accept also that a deeper analysis will require major data collection and detailed comparisons with the experiences of other institutions across the country. Nevertheless, our situation is not improving and we need to make some serious decisions soon. We invite colleagues to consider the data in this report and to judge whether our conclusions make sense.

Until we step back and examine our history frankly and honestly we cannot begin to solve our current problems. Let us agree that the status quo is no longer acceptable. Our continued low ranking within the UC system, and our continuing mediocre public image devalue the degrees of our alumni and damage the reputation of the faculty. These are demoralizing, but undeniable facts. Rather than insist on the merits of a grading system that is no longer the recruitment tool it once was, we need to find new and effective ways to improve our overall intellectual environment in order to attract the best students. We believe this improvement depends on implementing a judicious mix of reforms of our grading system and curricula, and on new investments in hiring and research. The founding faculty intended that this campus would set a high standard of excellence for university education. *In the same spirit, let us set for ourselves a challenging new goal: to return to the first tier of the UC system by the year 2010.*

ⁱ We thank University Director of Admissions Carla Ferri for providing the SAT data.

ⁱⁱ Note that because ETS "re-centered" all scores from 1996 onward, there are jumps from 1995 to 1996 which do not represent real changes in performance.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is contrary opinion within our faculty on the significance and interpretation of the SAT data. The Committee on Admissions and Financial Aid (CAFA) sent out a report via email on January 12 entitled "Perspective on the impact of the NES on student quality." The report analyzed a smaller dataset of total SAT scores from three UC campuses^{3/4} Berkeley, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz^{3/4} from 1978 to 1998, and concluded that "the narrative evaluation system (NES) neither hampers nor promotes our recruitment efforts, on balance." The CAFA report indicated that the Berkeley students' SAT scores were significantly higher than those of the other campuses, and attributed the difference to the "significantly higher research prestige of UC Berkeley." This statement and the comparison with UCSB have left the general impression that UCSC's rank in the UC undergraduate system cannot be changed, considering the nature of the campus and the limitations imposed by UC, and so that there is no real need for reforms.

We do not find the CAFA arguments persuasive. Only data from 1978 on are used, even though, as discussed in the text, the most interesting and telling evidence comes from 1970 to 1978. Also, CAFA restricted themselves to data from only three campuses, with no mention of important trends in SAT scores at other campuses, as discussed above. Furthermore, CAFA used only total SAT scores, though the most dramatic differences between UCSC and the other campuses emerge in the math SAT scores. Omitting all these data from the analysis gives the false impression that the SAT scores of UCSC students have not changed much over the years and are not significantly different from any of the other campuses, with the exception of Berkeley.