

Student Research Review: Student Learning, Trends, and Expectations

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Welcome to the new issue of the *Student Research Review*, a newsletter created by the Division of Student Affairs to review student development, learning, and outcomes research findings of interest to educators.

The Student Research Review is produced by the Student Outcomes Research department, which administers surveys and manages wide-ranging university studies as a part of USC's overall approach to student research.

For more information about this newsletter and other Student Affairs research efforts:

- Visit the Student Outcomes Research Web site at www.usc.edu/student-affairs/sor
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USC's Changing Academic Reputation

Reasons for Attending USC

Each incoming USC undergraduate student is given the opportunity to complete an incoming student survey. The content of the surveys is slightly different for freshmen and transfer students. All students are asked to give their reasons for attending USC, indicating which of several reasons were important in their decision to attend USC.

The new student survey is given prior to students beginning their study at USC, during the pre-orientation process. For students entering in fall 2007 and spring 2008, 92% of freshmen and 81% of transfer students completed the survey. Tables 1 and 2 show the range of responses to this question for students entering in fall 2007 and spring 2008, for freshmen and transfers respectively.

For both freshmen and transfers, academic reputation is the most important reason for attending USC. Less than one-half of one percent of all incoming students responding to these surveys believe that USC's academic reputation is not important. Students cited graduates' abilities to "get good

jobs" as the next most important factor in choosing USC.

Some surprising data emerged from this question. Many people place great importance in national rankings of colleges and universities. However, only 37% of freshmen stated that rankings were very important. A higher percentage of transfer students (54%) considered rankings very important.

Family members' influence does not appear to be an important reason for most incoming students to attend USC. Only 10% of freshmen and 20% of transfer students considered this very important, although a good number of both populations considered it somewhat important.

Campus visits had a positive effect for incoming students, with 60% of freshmen and 41% of transfer students considering it very important and most of the remaining students considering it somewhat important.

Differences Between Incoming Freshmen and Transfer Students

There were five factors where clear significant ($p < .05$) differences emerged between

freshmen and transfer students. As discussed above, rankings are a more important factor to transfers. Also, as previously discussed, campus visits are more important to freshmen. It may be that transfer students, having had experiences at other schools, are not as highly influenced by a campus visit as less experienced freshmen.

The desire to live near home was cited as very important by 25% of transfer students and only 12% of freshmen. This may be because a significant percentage of transfer students live in Southern California, transferring from other area schools. As nearly 50% of freshmen are from out of state, this factor is not as important to them. The influence of relatives is also more important to transfer students. This also may be because more transfer students are from Southern California.

Relatively few incoming students considered USC's religious affiliation/orientation to be a very important factor. USC does not have a specific religious affiliation, though it is home to many religious organizations. However, nearly 7% of transfer students considered

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Table 1. Percentage of 2007-2008 Incoming Freshmen Rating Importance of Factors in Influencing their Decision to Attend USC (n = 3,232)

Factor	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
USC has a very good academic reputation	90.4%	9.2%	0.4%
USC graduates get good jobs	82.9%	14.9%	2.2%
USC graduates gain admission to top graduate/professional schools	64.7%	27.4%	7.9%
USC has a good reputation for its social activities	64.6%	29.8%	5.6%
A visit to the campus	59.7%	27.6%	12.7%
I was offered financial assistance	41.7%	19.1%	39.2%
Rankings in national magazines	37.2%	47.2%	15.6%
USC's size	35.6%	47.4%	17.0%
The cost of attending USC	33.7%	31.6%	34.8%
Information from a Web site	19.4%	44.9%	35.7%
I wanted to live near home	12.1%	27.4%	60.6%
My relatives wanted me to come to USC	9.8%	33.7%	56.5%
High school counselor advised me	6.9%	33.8%	59.3%
Private college counselor advised me	5.1%	18.5%	76.4%
Teacher advised me	4.6%	32.2%	63.2%
I was admitted through an early action/decision program	3.5%	7.3%	89.1%
I was attracted by USC's religious affiliation/orientation	2.7%	16.7%	80.5%

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this factor “very important” and another 22% considered it “somewhat important,” compared to approximately 3% (very important) and 17% (somewhat important) for freshmen. One explanation may be that more transfer students have had exposure to religious organizations at their previous institution and consider this to be a factor when selecting USC.

Academic Reputation Over the Years

The freshman survey has been given, in some form, to incoming students for more than 10 years, allowing a longitudinal look at key factors in students’ choice of USC.

It should be noted that the wording of the academic reputation was different in fall 2006 and 2007, compared to earlier years. Between 1998 and 2005, the Cooperative Institution Research Program (CIRP) survey, published by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) was given to students. This is a nationally administered survey used by many

colleges and universities. In this survey, students were asked to rate the importance of the factor “This college has a very good academic

reputation.” In 2006 and 2007, a survey developed by USC staff was administered and the question asked students to rate the

importance of the factor “USC has a very good academic reputation.” The change in language from “this college” to “USC” may have influenced students, as evidenced by the spike from 2005 to 2006. However, it may be that, seeing “USC” in the question personalized the issue for students and made them feel more obligated to note USC’s academic reputation. However, students are informed that individual responses are confidential, so their level of obligation is unclear.

Also, the increase in reputation was evident prior to 2005. Between 1998 and 2005, when the same survey with the same wording was used, the percentage of “very important” responses increased from 71% to 80%.

Rise in National Rankings

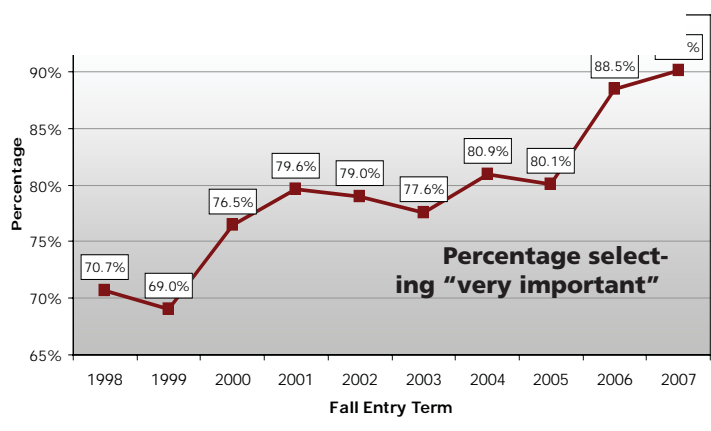
USC has risen in the national rankings over the past 10 years, as evidenced by the *US News & World Report Best Colleges* publication.¹ In the rankings of national universities, USC was ranked 41 and 42 in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Since then, there has been a steady increase, culminating in rankings

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Table 2. Percentage of 2007-2008 Incoming Transfer Students Rating Importance of Factors in Influencing their Decision to Attend USC (n = 1,006)

Factor	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
USC has a very good academic reputation	94.5%	5.0%	0.5%
USC graduates get good jobs	90.1%	8.1%	1.8%
USC graduates gain admission to top graduate/professional schools	77.9%	17.6%	4.5%
USC has a good reputation for its social activities	64.7%	28.9%	4.5%
Rankings in national magazine	54.0%	35.2%	10.7%
A visit to the campus	40.7%	36.4%	22.9%
I was offered financial assistance	33.1%	21.9%	45.0%
USC's size	29.4%	44.0%	26.7%
Information from a Web site	27.7%	37.9%	34.4%
The cost of attending USC	26.2%	37.7%	36.2%
I wanted to live near home	25.2%	32.3%	42.5%
My relatives wanted me to come to USC	20.0%	38.0%	42.1%
Teacher advised me	12.6%	34.8%	52.6%
I was attracted by USC's religious affiliation/orientation	6.9%	22.0%	71.2%
Private college counselor advised me	6.6%	24.0%	69.4%
High school counselor advised me	5.2%	21.7%	73.1%
I was admitted through an early action/decision program	2.2%	10.5%	87.3%

Importance of USC's Academic Reputation: Fall 1998 to Fall 2007



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of 27 the past two years. Table 3 shows the change in overall rank.

One important element of the *US News & World Report* ranking system is the peer assessment score, which is based on subjective ratings of each school's overall reputation, as determined by college presidents and other leaders. USC's score on this scale has also consistently increased (or remained the same) each year since 1999, from 3.6 to 4.0 (on a 5-point scale).

Just as college presidents are aware of USC's changing reputation, it may be that incoming students are as well. Even though not all students consider rankings important, many of them are likely aware of the rankings—as are their parents, teachers and other people who may counsel prospective college students.

Another key component of the *US News & World Report* ranking system is the selectivity rank,

which takes into account how selective a school is in accepting incoming students. This rank has increased from 54 in 1999 to 19 in 2008. If a student knows or perceives that USC is more selective, then it is more likely that he or she will be aware of the school's academic reputation and consider it important.

USC's academic reputation has increased in importance for incoming freshmen over the years, as Figure 1 demonstrates. USC's rise in national rankings and increased selectivity likely play a part in this increase.

Based on survey results, USC freshmen arrive on a college campus with certain beliefs they deem important for a successful college experience. Students were asked to rate the importance of certain expectations on a 5-point scale. Results for items from this section are presented in Table 1.

Increased Selectivity

USC's own admissions data supports the notion of increased selectivity. USC's Division of Enrollment Services cites a "Freshman Quality Index" to allow for year-to-year comparisons of incoming students. According to this index, the quality of freshmen, as measured by both high school GPA and SAT scores, increased each year from 2001 to 2005. Again, if freshmen are aware of this increased selectivity, they may consider academic reputation a more important factor.

Another indicator of selectivity is the *US News & World Report* selectivity rank, listed in Table 3. In 1999, USC was ranked 54th nationally. Between 2000 and 2005, the rankings increased or stayed the same each year, ranging from 39th to 21st. Since 2006, the selectivity rankings have been 19th, 17th, and 19th, respectively. There has been a clear upward trend in USC's selectivity.

Other Explanations

When responding to surveys, students may give more favorable answers to questions about the university. Because the survey is normally presented as part of the orientation or pre-orientation process, respondents may consider USC to be the "questioner" and allow this fact to bias their responses. This may be true even if students are aware that their individual results are anonymous and that honest responses are expected. Freshmen may be especially susceptible to this. However, this response bias, if present, would have been evident

10 years ago. There is no apparent explanation for why it would increase over time.

Another explanation may be that college students everywhere perceive academic reputation more important now than they did several years ago. However, this does not appear to be the case. The Higher Education Research Institute (2007) reports that the number of freshmen who cite academic reputation as "very important" has remained relatively stable over a 24-year period (1983 to 2006)—in the 57% to 58% range.³

Other Research

In addition to the new student survey, the Student Outcomes Research department conducts a wide range of surveys and research projects. For example, the Student Satisfaction Survey was last administered to a random sample of undergraduates in 2006. In this survey, students were asked to report their level of satisfaction with the instruction they received at USC. When asked if they were satisfied with the overall quality of instruction by USC faculty, 79% of students said they were either satisfied (57%) or very satisfied (22%). A similar question was asked in 2003, with 74% of students expressing some level of satisfaction.

All freshmen living in USC residence halls in the spring semester of their first year are given a "Check-In Survey." This survey is meant to assess students' level of satisfaction with their USC experi-

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Table 3. USC's Ranking in US News & World Report Best Colleges 1999-2008*

Selected Indicators	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Overall Rank	41	42	35	34	31	30	30	30	27	27
Peer assessment score**	3.6	3.6	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.9	4.0
Graduation/retention rank	69	60	54	48	47	47	40	41	36	35
Faculty resources rank	45	55	58	52	44	38	34	30	24	28
Selectivity rank	54	39	31	25	23	21	21	19	17	19
Financial resources rank	38	42	44	49	45	43	45	44	45	40
Alumni giving rank	61	60	44	39	21	15	16	13	14	15

*Data are published in the prior year. For example, the 2008 rankings were published in August 2007.

**5.0 = highest

USC's Rising Retention and Graduation Rates

Table 1. USC Freshman-Sophomore Retention Rates and Six-Year Graduation Rates, Incoming Freshman Classes, 1995 - 2001

Fall entry term	Freshman-sophomore retention rate	Six-year graduation rate
1995	90%	73%
1996	92%	76%
1997	95%	81%
1998	94%	82%
1999	94%	83%
2000	94%	84%
2001	94%	85%
2002	95%	n/a
2003	96%	n/a
2004	95%	n/a
2005	96%	n/a
2006	96%	n/a

ence. In spring 2007, students were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the overall quality of instruction after their first semester. Again, a large number (80%) were either satisfied (60%) or very satisfied (20%). Approximately 68% of students completed the survey.

Finally, undergraduate students were interviewed in 2006 and 2007 as part of the Listening to Students project. (This project is discussed in more detail on page 5.) In this interview-based research project, students were asked to discuss their reasons for attending USC. Interestingly, only 24 of 143 students (17%) mentioned "academic reputation" as their first or primary choice. However, many more students (49%) cited an academic experience as "most valuable" during their time at USC.

1 US News and World Report Best Colleges (2008).

2 Hutchinson, S. & Lovell, C. (2004). A review of methodological characteristics of research published in key journals in higher education: Implications for graduate research training. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(4), 383-403.

3 The American Freshman 40-Year Trends, 1966-2006 (2007). Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.

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Freshman-Sophomore Retention

Over the last 12 years, USC's undergraduate retention rates have, for the most part, increased each year. In 1996, 90% of the previous year's freshmen returned for their second year. For 2002 freshmen, this freshman-sophomore retention rate increased to 95%. Since 2002, the rate has remained steady, in the 95% to 96% range. In Table 1, retention rates for entering freshman classes going back to 1995 are presented.

How does this compare to other private institutions? According to a national survey of colleges and universities conducted by ACT, in 2007, 93% of freshman at highly selective four-year private institutions comparable to USC (i.e., institutions that offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees) returned for their second year.¹ (The ACT used the term "highly selective" to describe institutions where students scored between 1220-1380 for the middle 50% of the SAT and accept a majority of its students from the top 10% of their high school class.) For all private institutions, the retention rate was 74%; for the past 20 years, this

rate has remained between 73% and 75%. So, USC's steady climb in freshman-sophomore retention compares very favorably to other private institutions.

Graduation

USC's graduation rates have also risen markedly over time. Of the entering freshmen in 1995, only 73% graduated within six years. For freshmen entering in 2001 (the last year for which six-year data are available), this rate was 85%.

Ensuring first-year students are successful in college and return for their second year is of great concern for administrators and faculty. A review of recent retention studies by the ACT suggests that over half of all students who leave college do so before their sophomore year.² A Consortium for Student Retention study found an attrition rate of 20% for first-year students, 11% for second-years, and 9% for third and later years. As shown in Table 1, the increase in graduation rates has been fairly steady for the freshmen classes entering between 1995 and 2001.

According to the 2007 ACT survey, 83% of entering students

at highly selective four-year private institutions comparable to USC (i.e., institutions that offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees) earn a bachelor's degree within five years.¹ For all comparable private institutions regardless of selectivity, the five-year rate is 60%. ACT did not report six-year rates; however, the five-year rate for USC is generally 1% to 2% lower than the six-year rate. For entering freshmen in 2002, the class examined by the ACT survey, USC's five-year rate was 84%. Again, USC's current graduation rates compare very favorably to other private institutions.

Explanations for Increases

Early studies of student retention by Spady and Tinto, cited in Swail (2006) suggested social and academic integration were key factors in students' decisions to stay in college.² The extent of student success in academic pursuits determines their commitment to educational goals and to the institution. Bean and Eaton (2002) used psychological models to describe retention, suggesting students who were more satisfied with their institution would be more committed and therefore continue with their studies.³

Later research focused on specific factors within the college environment that affected student persistence. A study by the Higher Education Research Institute (2003) suggested academic, faculty, and peer group involvement were important indicators of retention.⁴ Researchers believed both inside and outside the classroom involvement impacted students' commitment to college. Others, such as Terenzini et al. (1999) examined learning outside of the classroom.⁵

Many educators believe tackling the problem of retention should involve the efforts of both academic services and student affairs. Tinto believed colleges

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Listening to Students Interview Project

that are committed to developing supportive educational communities will witness higher student retention rates. Furthermore, to add to the challenge, different types of institutions will need to have different retention policies and programs aimed at supporting their specific student populations.

In a 2004 study conducted by the ACT on effective programs to improving retention, survey respondents reported offering freshman seminars (16.5%), providing academic advising for selected student populations (16.2%), and placing students in internships (13.5%) as the top three programs to ensure freshman students return for their sophomore year.⁶

Here at USC, efforts have been made to understand which factors best predict or explain the increases in retention and graduation rates. An interdisciplinary team of researchers at USC—the Student Persistence and Graduation Workgroup—continues to perform research with the ultimate goal of increasing retention and graduation.

In the next issue of *Student Research Review*, a more detailed analysis and discussion of these factors will be presented. Also, the Student Outcomes Research Web site—www.usc.edu/student-affairs/sor—includes data and reports related to retention and graduation rates.

Beginning in 2006, as part of an effort to better understand students' perceptions of the undergraduate experience, USC's Division of Student Affairs conducted the "Listening to Students" research project, in which staff members and graduate students in education held informal interviews with undergraduate students. Initiated in spring 2006 as a part of strategic plan objective to create a "culture of evidence," this research focuses on one-to-one conversations between undergraduate students and key Student Affairs staff to allow the university to further understand students' perceptions. Here, interviews conducted in fall 2006 and spring 2007 are summarized.

Methodology and Sample

During the 2006-2007 academic year, 32 Student Affairs staff members and 25 Rossier School of Education graduate students acted as interviewers. A Web portal was designed to allow interviewers to schedule available time for interviews. In each semester, a random sample of 3,000 undergraduate students was selected (excluding first semester freshmen, due to their limited experience in college) and invited to participate in the project. Students were directed to the project Web site, where they could schedule an appointment.

Of the 6,000 students invited to participate in 2006-2007, 170 students completed an interview, resulting in a response rate of 2.8%. There are many possible reasons for the low response rate, such as the unwillingness of students to complete a 30- to 45-minute interview with an unfamiliar individual, the possibility of students feeling that they already have contributed feedback to the university through surveys, and the impersonal use of email as the primary means of reaching out to students to solicit their participation.

Table 1. Experiences Valued Most by Students (n = 149)

Category	Percentage
Academic experiences	49.0%
People and social interactions	22.8%
Clubs and organizations	13.4%
Diversity of students	6.7%
Housing	3.4%
Community surrounding USC	2.7%
Athletic programs	2.0%

Summary of Findings: Academics Come to Forefront

The first series of interview questions address students' experience and satisfaction with the university. Students were asked "What have you experienced at USC that you find most valuable?" Academic experiences were the most common response category cited by students in response to this question, with 49% indicating an academically-related experience as most valuable. Several students noted the opportunity to learn from other students and to engage with professors during class discussions. In the words of one student, "[class discussions] have really opened my mind." Another student cited her experience in the Thornton School of Music: "I love the interaction with the faculty and the ability to perform with wonderful guest

artists." Other examples provided by students conducting research with professors and the willingness of faculty members to talk with students.

Approximately 23% of students said that the people they met and the social interactions they had were most valuable, citing examples such as participation in activities such as Welcome Week, Pre-Rush, residential housing programs, and campus speakers and events.

Another theme among the responses—cited by approximately 13% of interviewees—is students' appreciation of opportunities to participate in different academic and social organizations on campus, including cultural clubs, musical groups, recreational sports, volunteer programs, and fraternities and sororities.

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Table 2. Experiences Valued Least by Students (n = 145)

Category	Percentage
Academic experiences	41.4%
Services and programs	16.6%
People and social interactions	10.3%
Housing	9.0%
Transportation and parking	8.3%
Athletics and ticketing	6.9%
Nothing (no specific area of dissatisfaction)	3.4%
Cost	2.8%
Clubs and organizations	0.7%
Security	0.7%

1 ACT Institutional Data Files (2007). Iowa City, IA: ACT.

2 Swail, W.S. (2006). Barriers to student retention and success on college campuses. *Student Success*, March 2006

3 Bean, J., & Eaton, S.B. (2002). The psychology underlying successful retention practices. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 3(1), 73-89.

4 How "Good" Is Your Retention Rate? Los Angeles, CA: HERI.

5 Terenzini, P.T., Pascarella, E.T., & Bliming, G.S. (1999). Students' out-of-class experiences and their influence on learning and cognitive development: a literature review. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 610-623.

6 Habley, W.R. & McClanahan, R. (2004) What works in student retention? Iowa City, IA: ACT

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Students' responses to this question are shown in Table 1 and seem to suggest an engaging academic and social environment exists at USC, considering that half of all students cited academic experiences as valuable and many other students mentioned social interactions, clubs, and organizations.

Students were then asked "What have you experienced that has been less valuable?" Forty-one percent of the respondents to this question were dissatisfied with an academically-related experience. Examples provided by students included large lecture classes that hinder student learning; some instructors' ineffective teaching styles; and the inability to engage students during class. In describing the class size issue, one student said that "it is difficult to engage with professors in classes of several hundred students."

Following academic experiences, the next most common responses to this question concerned USC services, with 17% of students finding little value in student programs and services. One common theme among the interviews was inadequate space and campus resources for students, including insufficient recreational and parking facilities and a lack of a common area where students can eat or study together. Table 2 shows the full range of responses to this question.

Students were also asked a more specific question about their USC experience: "During your time at USC, what has most engaged, cultivated, and enriched your mind and spirit?" The responses to this question primarily fell into three categories: clubs and organizations (34%), campus cultural and sports events (29%), and classes and academic opportunities (22%). The full range of response categories is shown in Table 3.

Of those students citing clubs and organizations as most engaging, three interviewees mentioned Alternative Break trips. Other organizations mentioned by students include the Marshall Women's

Leadership Board, KSCR, Program Board, Volunteer Center, and the Taiwanese American student organization. Among students saying campus cultural and sports events engaged, cultivated, and enriched their mind and spirit, the Visions and Voices program was cited by eight students. Of those citing classes and academic opportunities, six students specifically mentioned the General Education (GE) program. One student said that GE classes were difficult, but that the information he learned "opened his eyes above and beyond his horizon." Other students mentioned specific classes and professors.

Another question of interest addressed academic expectations. Students were asked "What were your expectations of the academic experience at USC? If students said they had high expectations, they were asked "Have these expectations been met?"

Most of the students interviewed (82%) said they expected their academic experience would be difficult. One student anticipated that her classes would be challenging and that professors would be intimidating. Another student, who had good grades in high school, expected it would be more difficult to achieve those same grades at USC. Another student believed his classmates would be more competitive because he knows USC attracts the top students from different schools.

Of the students who gave specific responses to the second part of this question (whether expectations have been met), 60% mentioned their expectations were met and an additional 24% students indicated their expectations have been met, but with exceptions. One student, reporting that his expectations were met, said that accounting classes have been difficult and that the professors assign many group projects. Most students who cited exceptions to their expectations said some courses were more challenging than others. One student said some of her professors have pushed her to "think about stuff" while other instructors "just use PowerPoint and multiple choice tests."

Table 3. What Has Most Engaged, Cultivated, and Enriched the Mind and Spirit of Students (n = 128)

Category	Percentage
Clubs and organizations	34.4%
Cultural and sporting events	28.9%
Classes and academic opportunities	25.0%
Other	7.0%
Interactions with people	4.7%

Reasons for Choosing USC

Students were also asked why they chose to apply and ultimately attend USC. Students offered a variety of reasons. The most common reason was the availability of academic programs that students were interested in studying; 30% of students said the availability of programs and/or majors influenced their decision to attend USC.

Some of the specific programs students mentioned include engineering, architecture, pharmacy, communications, music, and the Resident Honors Program.

Twenty-five students (17%) cited the location of USC as the primary reason for their choice. Most students who said location was an influence mentioned that relatives lived in the area. The location of the school also related to what the students wanted to study. For example, one student majoring in cinema-television wanted to live close to Hollywood. Still, some students who grew up in other areas wanted to move to the Los Angeles area because of the weather.

USC's academic reputation (17%) was also a major factor in students' choice. Within this category, nine students specifically

mentioned the Marshall School of Business for its excellent reputation. Two students specifically cited USC's standing in the *US News and World Report* college rankings. In Table 4, complete results for this question are shown. Financial aid (12%) and campus visits (11%) were also cited frequently. One student said that USC's financial aid package "sealed the deal" in choosing between several schools. Three students citing the importance of campus visits mentioned that they noticed USC's size during their visit; one of them said that he appreciated the fact that USC is a "small community."

Given the survey data cited in the article on USC's improving academic reputation beginning on the first page, it was somewhat surprising that only 17% of students cited USC's academic reputation as the primary reason for choosing USC. This suggests that no matter the reputation of the university, more students will make the decision to attend based on availability of programs and majors that interest them.

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Table 4. Reasons for Attending USC (n = 143)

Category	Percentage
Availability of programs and majors	30.1%
Location	17.5%
Academic reputation	16.8%
Financial aid / scholarship	11.9%
Campus visit	11.2%
Family	8.4%
Diversity	3.5%
Athletics	0.7%

Unique USC Experience

Responses to this question varied greatly, with a few common themes emerging. The Trojan Family, or a sense of campus community, was students' most common response regarding what makes the USC experience unique, cited by 21 of 143 students who responded to this question. One student said that "at USC I am not just a number. There is a real sense of family." Another believed that "once you're a Trojan, you're always a Trojan."

One student cited the history and tradition of USC, saying "when you step on the campus you can feel it." Another talked about the independence among different schools and departments at USC. She said that, although the schools are independent, "they know how to work collaboratively." Another mentioned the balance between social life and academics.

Ten students mentioned USC's location in Los Angeles and connection to the rest of the region as a unique feature. These students cited proximity and connection to the entertainment industry, as well as collaborations with the downtown business community.

Conclusions

Overall, students were engaged and very willing to talk about their USC experience, whether positive or negative. Their responses reflected a focus on their academic experience, both in and out of the classroom. There were concerns that students who actually participated in interviews may be different from the overall undergraduate population, a concern heightened by the low response rate. However, further analyses demonstrated that the students participating as interviewees were similar in performance (measured by GPA), gender, ethnicity, and range of majors.

Student interviewees served as a fairly representative cross-section of the USC experience in terms of age, program of study, and opinion. The exception was the exclusion of first-semester fresh-

men who, it was assumed, had not yet received enough of the USC experience. Student interviewees were generally enthusiastic about participating in the Listening to Students project. Many interviewees reported that many students stayed longer than expected and gave thorough and informative answers to all of the questions they were asked. Some students were reluctant to talk about their experience, but most students seemed to feel comfortable opening up about themselves. Several interviewees mentioned that some students were reluctant to speak at first, but opened up after a while. Given that this is a unique process—students are usually not interviewed by staff members for research purposes—this initial hesitation is understandable.

It is important to consider the impact of self-selection as it relates to the findings. Even though respondents were part of two separate random samples of 3,000 students each, given that the response rate was low, the 170 participating students may be a unique group—both in terms of their initial decision to participate and their commitment to complete the interview.

For these reasons, the findings from the Listening to Students report will have some limits in generalizability to the USC undergraduate student body at-large. However, the purpose of the Listening to Students research is to elicit a depth of response not ordinarily achievable on traditional measures of student satisfaction and experience. Compared to traditional student surveys, these interviews are more student-driven and will lead to response details not normally accessible with a survey.

For more information regarding the history and background of the Listening to Students project, as well as additional findings, please visit the Student Outcomes Research Web site: www.usc.edu/student-affairs/sor.

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Pedagogy and Residential Life

In recent years, USC has attempted to more clearly define itself as a residential campus. In a 2006 speech to faculty, President Steven Sample said that USC is "rapidly evolving from a commuter university to a residential university" and noted that "the opportunities for peer-to-peer learning are much greater at a residential university." How will this change manifest itself in the actual programs and learning opportunities available to students?

In a review of pedagogical contributions to residential life, Buller (2008) cites three "traditional" contributions that scholars and student affairs professionals believed were important components of a residential campus experience:

- Residence halls offer experiences to students that they will experience in their work life.
- Residence halls provide a structured problem-solving environment
- Residence halls provide opportunities for student development in leadership, initiative, and collaboration.

These three areas provide the foundation for residential life programs and situations that most students experience. Buller then discusses five additional pedagogical areas which will play an increasing role in residential life:

- Residence halls will offer more opportunities for experiential learning
- Residence halls will increase in their use as social laboratories.
- Residence halls will offer greater opportunities for complementary learning experiences.
- In residence halls, there will be greater opportunities for peer-based learning and peer-determined codes of behavior.
- Residence halls will at least partially provide alternatives or correctives to traditional grade-based learning models.

Residential life at USC has reflected each of the components discussed, both in terms of foundational residence hall components and innovative, learning-based areas. Some of these areas have been addressed by research at USC. In 2006, a satisfaction survey was given to a sample of undergraduate students, with 1,008 students completing the survey. Most students (72%) expressed satisfaction when asked to address their "opportunity to engage in intellectual conversation outside of class with other students." For students who, at the time, were living in residence halls, 78% expressed satisfaction. Satisfied students were those choosing "very satisfied" or "satisfied."

Several residence halls have faculty living among the students and offering additional pedagogical experiences than students might face inside the classroom. In the satisfaction survey, 47% of students expressed satisfaction with their interactions with resident faculty, with another 38% expressing neutrality. Interestingly, this was significantly lower than the 79% satisfaction level when students were asked about all faculty.

As currently measured, the students exposed to the experience of USC as a residential campus are generally satisfied. In spring 2007 (n=1,910) and spring 2008 (n=1,347), second semester freshmen living in residence halls were surveyed about their overall experience at USC. At a point at which their experience has been largely residential, 86% of students felt satisfied with their overall USC experience and 80% felt part of the "Trojan Family."

Additional research is needed to address the more precise pedagogical components of the residential campus experience discussed by Buller, specifically the experiential, complementary, and peer-based learning experiences. Future issues of Student Research Review will address these pedagogical trends.

¹ Buller, J. (2008). The increasingly pedagogical role of residence life. *Student Affairs Leader*, 36(1), 1-6.

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