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Title

On Quality of the University

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Text of letter to a University of California alumnus
concerned about the quality of the University

Thank you for your thoughtful letter. I have the highest regard for our alumni, and I always welcome their views on the University. The quality of the University is my highest priority, and I assure you the University of California remains one of the most respected institutions of higher education in the world.

The excellence of the University of California's graduate education and its faculty is unparalleled. You may be interested to know that UC is home to 28 Nobel laureates, 12 of whom have received their awards since 1995. In the National Research Council's (NRC) 1995 study of the quality of American doctoral programs, more than one-third of all UC doctoral programs evaluated placed in the top ten in their fields on faculty quality. Nationwide, UC Berkeley had the greatest number of programs in the top 10. The NRC study, which is conducted every 10 years, is recognized as the most reliable and comprehensive measure of university graduate programs in the nation. In a 1996 article in *Change* magazine, researchers used the [NRC data](#) ⁽¹⁾ to compute a ranking of the scholarly quality of program faculty averaged over disciplines for each university. I enclose a copy of their findings.

Another national study, by researchers Hugh Davis Graham and Nancy Diamond, found that the UC system leads the nation in research excellence and productivity among public universities. The authors particularly noted the rapid rise to excellence of the Santa Barbara, Riverside, and Santa Cruz campuses. In overall research performance per faculty member, UC Berkeley was ranked first among public research universities, UC Santa Barbara ranked second, and UCLA ranked fourth.

The University of California also consistently attracts extremely bright and motivated undergraduate students. The quality of these students, as gauged both by standard measures of achievement, such as SAT II scores, and by high school GPAs is increasing. Universitywide, the average SAT II English and Math scores of entering freshmen have risen over the last three years. Likewise, the percentage of freshmen who entered the University with high school GPAs of 3.6 or greater has increased.

The proportion of undergraduate students who graduate from the University of California is at an historic high. Today, three-quarters of the freshmen who enter the University will earn a baccalaureate degree within six years. Correspondingly, the length of time it takes students to graduate has declined.

The curricular requirements for undergraduate admission are strong as well. You mention the University has discarded the a-f requirements. On the contrary, the subject requirements for admission, now referred to as the "a-f/g" subjects, remain the foundation of freshman admissions, and are used for assessing students' basic eligibility for UC, as well as for admission. We have also added a new requirement in the arts. The University continues to select from the top 12.5 percent of graduating high school seniors in California, and approves the courses in the a-f pattern. The academic courses we require are rigorous and are intended to send a message to students and schools about the type of preparatory work in fundamental disciplines necessary to undertake UC level work.

As you may have heard, the University has instituted a new admissions process called comprehensive review, which will continue to stress the importance of academic preparation and completion of academic coursework beyond the minimum required for UC eligibility. Under comprehensive review, all applicants would be assessed on an entire range of academic and personal criteria established by UC faculty. It replaces a two-tiered process in which each campus was required to admit 50-75 percent of its freshman class solely on the basis of certain academic factors. The faculty and administration of the University believe that the academic quality of the class admitted to a particular campus will be strengthened by comprehensive review. The practice of reviewing the full range of accomplishments presented by an applicant--as opposed to a narrow range of those accomplishments--will ensure more thorough and informed decisions. Campuses' ability to admit students who not only score well on traditional measures but are prepared to thrive in the University's demanding academic environment will be improved, and academic quality will be enhanced. This process is very similar to the process that other highly selective institutions have used for a number of years.

I also wish to take this opportunity to address the issue you raise about college rankings in national news magazines. It is intuitively difficult to explain the apparent contradiction between the University's consistently high performance on measures of both student and faculty quality and its ranking in these publications. For instance, *US News and World Report* annually ranks colleges and universities on the quality of their undergraduate programs, and I enclose copies of the 2002 rankings [\(2\)\(3\)](#) for your information. However, the *US News* ranking model is biased in favor of private institutions; elite private schools tend to score better in *US News'* rankings because they have smaller classes, lower student-faculty ratios, higher faculty salaries and higher alumni giving rates than do public institutions. Berkeley, for example, was 20th in the 2002 rankings--no public institution was ranked higher.

We are pleased, however, that in *US News'* rankings of the nation's best public universities, all of the University of California campuses are in the top 30, with Berkeley ranked first. No other public university system can boast such a record.

You may also be interested to know that six of our campuses are members of the prestigious Association of American Universities (AAU), an extraordinary achievement unequalled in higher education. Given that UCSF is not eligible because it is principally a health sciences campus, six of nine campuses as members of the AAU is truly remarkable.

UC's faculty and administrators are continually reviewing the quality of the undergraduate education our students receive and ways in which that education can be improved. Conversations about the quality, rigor, and coherence of undergraduate education are an integral part of program planning and delivery at the campus, departmental, and systemwide levels. Because our faculty and campus administrations take their responsibilities for undergraduate education very seriously, students graduating from UC leave with a superb intellectual foundation. As you know, over the years our graduates have made significant contributions to California and the nation.

I am pleased that you remain interested in and concerned about your alma mater, and I hope you will agree that the overall quality of the University of California is higher than it has ever been. It was good of you to take the time to write and share your views.

Sincerely,

/s/ Richard C. Atkinson

Richard C. Atkinson
President

Enclosures:

- (1) [National Research Council data reported in *Change* magazine](#)
- (2) [U.S. News Ranking of Top National Doctoral Universities](#)
- (3) [U.S. News Ranking of Top National Public Universities](#)