

UC Berkeley's lack of services leaves many undergrads to sink or swim

'Little fish in a big pond'



Photos by MIKE KEPKA / The Chronicle

Sea of faces: Sophomores America Worden (center) and Anna Lyapis grappled with biology during a huge lecture class at Pimentel Hall.

By Tanya Schevitz
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

It is a world-class university with a street-tough swagger. A prestigious school that prides itself on its elite academics and working-class tuition.

But at UC Berkeley, it's not exactly the Ivy League.

When the university holds commencement exercises this week, a smaller proportion of University of California at Berkeley students, particularly minority students, will get their diplomas on time, if at all, as compared to students at other top-tier schools.

While UC Berkeley fares well when compared to other public institutions, the undergraduate experience it offers is in stark contrast with schools it considers its academic equals.

Stanford University freshmen are assigned personal counselors — faculty, staff or graduate students who watch over them, approve class schedules and even occasionally serve as dining partners in the residence halls.

Yale freshmen are paired with peer counselors who live in the dorm and faculty members who mentor and help choose classes.

At UC Berkeley, most incoming students have orientation with several hundred others, a quick chat with an adviser, then get a

"The first semester here, I was so confused and almost mad that nobody was there to hold my hand."

KATE GOODMAN, 20-year-old sophomore



Kate Goodman said being on the rowing team gave her access to resources. Otherwise, "I would think the school is insanely big."

phone number and Web address to use if they need more help.

"There is not a whole lot of cod-dling. Nothing is really easy here in terms of getting help," said sophomore Jonathan Hastanan, 19. "A couple of (my high school teachers) had warned me of being a little fish in a big pond. I didn't

really understand what that meant. But now I do."

Like other elite universities, UC Berkeley offers support services, such as academic advising and tutoring. But because it is a public university and largely dependent on state funding, services are spread thin.

And it is largely up to the students — most of them 17 or 18 years-old and living on their own for the first time — to find what they need. The savvy students get help. The weak don't survive.

And the long-term effect is eye-opening.

The campus' six-year graduation rate is 83.1 percent overall — not horrible when compared with Stanford's 93.1 percent or Yale's 94.5 percent, particularly when relative costs are considered. UC Berkeley costs \$12,716 a year for fees, room and board, compared to the Ivy League average of \$32,000.

But poor and underrepresented minority students don't fare as well: The grad rate for African Americans is just 57.9 percent, while it is 74.7 percent for Chicanos and Latinos. At schools such as Stanford and Yale minorities do not lag so far behind whites.

The limited student services offered at UC Berkeley are considered a major factor in the lower performance of poor and minority students.

In the College of Letters and Science, which enrolls 75 percent of the school's undergraduates, there are only about 30 academic counselors for the more than 10,000 students who have yet to declare a major.

The campus has a student to faculty ratio of 17.37 to 1 — com-

► **BERKELEY:** Page A17 Col. 1

► BERKELEY

From Page 1

pared with 71 to 1 at Stanford and 6.8 to 1 at Yale — so freshmen and sophomores mostly have classes packed with a few hundred students and have little contact with professors.

"It is sink or swim," said Vivian Young, a 20-year-old sophomore. "I didn't expect it to be that harsh. It was overwhelming because the classrooms were so big and there were like 500 people."

Higher education experts and professors at UC Berkeley say the primary reason is simple: The university's reputation does not come from undergraduate education but from research. So faculty attention is focused primarily there and on graduate students.

Alexander Astin, director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, said it is hard to attract world-class researchers and put the priority on undergraduate education, too.

"Students don't expect these big shots to spend a lot of time with the undergrads. There are exceptions of course, many professors are dedicated and passionate about teaching," Astin said. "But they are not going to get promoted or get tenure on the basis of their relationships with undergraduates."

He said that society reinforces this division. Parents like the prestige of the university, where almost every graduate program ranks in the top 10 — with most in the top five. Legislators complain that schools pay little attention to undergraduates, while they gloat over the star-studded research institutions in their backyard.

With 22,705 undergraduates, it may be difficult for UC Berkeley to improve the experience.

"We all have to examine our priorities," Astin said. "It is just a matter of resources. We don't have the money to do everything, so the priority is on research and graduate education."

And, according to Astin, the difference between what is spent on undergraduates versus research and graduate studies is enormous. "Two or three to one," he said.

But Astin defends the university's record in dealing with undergrads.

"Most of them finish, even if they never meet a professor. They manage because they are highly motivated and academically prepared," Astin said, pointing out that the high school grade point average of last year's entering class was 4.21. Indeed, the freshman retention rate is 97 percent — which rivals that of the elite private schools.

But talk to many students, and they will tell you everything is a struggle. Sylvia Srisinthorn, 18, a sophomore from the University of Pennsylvania who is spending a year studying at UC Berkeley, is surprised at the disparities.

"It is a lot different because at my school they pay way more attention to you than here. You didn't feel as lost. Here, you feel like you get thrown in, and you are drowning," she said.

At Penn, it is no problem to get into all but the most popular classes nearly up to the last day of registration, she said. At UC Berkeley, students register mostly over the telephone and are assigned a specific 24-hour period in each of two phases.

"Classes fill up so quickly so I had to cut class to register," said Jonathan Hastanan, Srisinthorn's boyfriend.

He said students have to play a juggling game because they can only sign up for 10 units (most classes are four units) at a time.

"I had to sacrifice enrolling in a science course to get into a business course because the business course

was more impacted," he said.

That means, he will most likely end up "crashing" several classes, as he did the past two semesters.

An iffy proposition, since it can take three weeks to find out whether a student has gained acceptance to a class. It is common for students to attend several classes, hoping they will get into one.

In the fall, Hastanan had to crash three of his four classes and, this semester, two of four.

"If you don't get a section or a lab that fits your time, it throws your whole schedule off," he said. And though the university lists myriad services such as advising, tutoring, psychological counseling, students say they often have a hard time getting access to any of them.

Appointments for counselors fill up quickly. In the College of Letters and Science, students must call on Thursday at 1 p.m. to book appointments for the next week. They often fill up within hours. Tutors are snapped up early in the semester. And students who drop in for advising and tutoring sometimes face long lines, especially when they are preparing for exams or choosing classes.

Worried about the work in her business administration class, freshman Lori Gomez, 18, requested a tutor at the beginning of the semester. But so many people in the class asked for help that no one was available for weeks.

"Ultimately they can say they offered me somebody, but it was already halfway through the semester. Two exams passed before they got me a tutor," she said.

There are other ways in which life at UC Berkeley can be an impersonal, anonymous experience for many students.

For one, while having contact with a professor is a top factor in how students rate their college experience, meetings rarely occur.

Especially in the first two years, interactions are between students and discussion section leaders, who are graduate students.

Part of the problem, professors say, is that students assume they won't be able to see a professor, and don't even try. Many faculty members sit in their office hours alone, waiting for students.

"It is all up to you," said junior Anna Lypais, 20. "I felt frustrated that the teachers were not reaching out. Then I realized you have to reach out to them."

Sociology Professor Thomas Gold said students are aghast when he tries to get to know their names in his large classes.

"Because of that, people come to talk to me and tell me about their lives. They feel as if nobody has paid attention to them and they are just a number or a blob," he said.

Many students, faculty and administrators say you can get a first-rate undergraduate education at UC Berkeley but you have to know how to work the system.

The key for 20-year-old sophomore Kate Goodman — recruited by the rowing team — was sports.

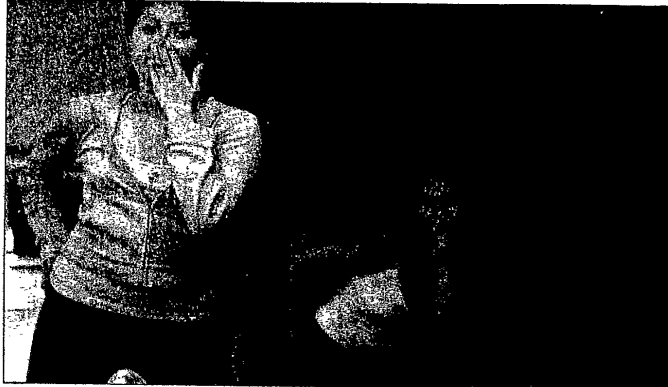
"The first semester here, I was so confused and almost mad that nobody was there to hold my hand," she said.

Then she realized that her salvation came through her involvement in the team.

Now, she has an adviser who gives her plenty of time: "If I wasn't an athlete or in something, I would think the school is insanely big. But there are an insane amount of services and resources. You need to be part of something. I don't know how you would do it otherwise."

Other students find that if they can hang in until junior year, they will be rewarded with attention.

Senior Naushad Huda, 22, an English major, said that his major



Sylvia Srisinthorn (left) practiced a dance routine at the Kappa Delta Phi, an Asian sorority house.



Above: Jonathan Hastanan studied while talking to girlfriend on the phone. At right: Junior Kenine Voyles gets tutored by a senior.



How to help undergrads

Many University of California at Berkeley administrators recognize there is a problem with the level of undergraduate services. A campus commission, as well as many administrators, including Genaro Padilla, UC Berkeley's vice chancellor for undergraduate affairs, have recommended:

► **Improving access to faculty advisers** by establishing a faculty presence in the residence halls.

► **Providing more academic advisers** in the residence halls and advisers for students moving out of campus housing.

► **The university** is considering a program that would match sophomores with professors in small groups for mentoring.

Professor Kwong-Loi Shun, dean of the College of Letters and Science, has offered these solutions:

► **Expanding drop-in advising services** from a few days a semester to every day, with four to seven advisers available for at least 4½ hours daily.

► **Offering student information** over the Internet.

adviser is attentive and that faculty are accessible.

And his classes are small. "It is only 20 people sitting around a table discussing literature one-on-one. It is expected that you will keep on top of the reading and contribute," he said.

Christine MacLach, vice provost for undergraduate education, said students have plenty of resources, but on a large campus they are not necessarily easy to locate.

"You find, all over the place, teams of undergraduates who are

working on really interesting, exciting projects, and not only do they work on their research, they are out there having picnics and lunches together and they go to conferences together," she said.

UC Berkeley's case can be perceived as an advantage.

Freshman Brandon Simmons, 18, said, it is one of the best things about the school.

"I really enjoy the fact that I don't have an adviser breathing down my neck," he said. "It may be harder because you have to do everything by yourself, but it builds you into an adult. You really mature much faster here."

Besides, just being on a campus with such intellectual talent is inspiring, he said.

"My history teacher wrote my textbook in high school," Simmons said. "I respect my professors so much more because they are so well-known."

That is the trade-off, said political science Professor Mark Bevir.

"Now if you want to go somewhere where what people are committed to is teaching and the absolutely overwhelming criteria is how well they do with students, then go somewhere like that."

But, he added, students who want a prestige research institution shouldn't then complain about the lack of services.

Bever believes Berkeley does a good job given its resources and size.

The issue, he said, is whether it is better to have a great number of students getting a decent education or an elite group of students getting a fantastic education.

"There are problems with the system, but those are problems based overwhelmingly on the sheer numbers of the students who go through," Bevir said. "You get less quality but it is more democratic."

But Joni Finney, vice president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, said the university has a responsibility

to take better care of undergraduates by introducing them to faculty and arranging for advisers.

"Other institutions help organize those kinds of interactions and especially in those first years," she said. "You have to be an incredibly independent person to make it in an environment like this."

Jack Citrin, a political science professor at UC Berkeley, agrees, and doesn't believe the campus gives students the individualized attention they need. Nor does he think they will succeed at doing so in the future.

"Undergraduate education is the poor handmaiden of the institution. Research comes first, graduate education comes second and undergraduate education comes third," Citrin said.

Even campus officials are coming to grips with the fact that if the university hopes to maintain its reputation as a world-class institution, undergraduates will need more care and feeding.

A report by a campus commission released last September says, "We cannot move forward as an institution as long as research and teaching — the university and the college — are locked in competition with each other."

Citrin said there is "no way" he would have encouraged his daughter to attend UC Berkeley. Instead, she went to Yale and graduated last year.

"I just see what happened to her as a result of going there, and it would not have been easy here," he said.

It would have been difficult to create the same atmosphere of intense intellectual exchange at such a large institution, he said.

"That said, every year 4,000 very able people graduate from here," Citrin said. "It is a good factory, a high-end factory."

E-mail Tanya Schvezit at tschvezit@sfcchronicle.com.

Incoming student services

UC Berkeley is the top public university and the only public school in the top 20, according to U.S. News and World Report's annual rankings. Here is how it compares to some of the schools it considers its peer.

UC BERKELEY

► **A broad orientation** with several hundred students, 80 percent of the incoming students attend

► **A few minutes to speak** with an adviser, after which students get a phone number and Web site address to use if they need additional help

► **Thirty academic advisers** for more than 10,000 undeclared students in the College of Letters and Science, which enrolls 75 percent of the undergraduates.

► **Academic centers** in the residence halls where students can get peer advising and group tutorials on some introductory courses. Students who are failing two classes are contacted by the advising center.

► **Housing:** All new students are offered campus housing and about 95 percent of freshmen live in the residence halls. Only 1,500 spaces are available for continuing students.

STANFORD

► **Upon enrollment**, faculty, staff and graduate student volunteers are assigned to six or eight new students and serve as advisers until the students declare a major. All of the students in each advising group live in the same residence hall.

► **Students are assigned** a peer adviser — an upper division student from their area of interest. In addition, there are 10 professional advisers available to students. Students must have their course schedules approved every quarter by an adviser, so at a minimum they meet three times a year.

► **At the end of the quarter**, student class transcripts are evaluated by all advisers who direct those who need it to available resources. In addition, the Undergraduate Advising Center gets midterm grades for many of the tougher introductory courses such as chemistry, economics and math. Students having difficulty are sent to an adviser to brainstorm interventions.

► **Housing:** Guaranteed all four years. All freshmen required to live in campus housing.

YALE

► **New students are assigned** to a residential college, where a dean lives and oversees the students. Each student is also assigned to a faculty member, who is in charge of between two and six students. Faculty must sign off on course schedules before students can enroll.

► **Each student is also matched** with a senior, who lives in the same residential college, provides academic and social advising and signs off on the course schedule.

► **If students get into academic trouble**, the residential college dean is notified. The dean then contacts the students' advisers.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN, ANN ARBOR

► **The College of Literature and Science**, which enrolls almost 70 percent of undergraduates, offers orientation where students are broken into groups of seven.

► **An academic adviser**, who oversees about 150 students, is assigned. The adviser must sign off on students' course schedules.

How UC Berkeley stacks up against peers

UC Berkeley is the nation's top public university and the only public school in the top 20, according to U.S. News & World Report's annual rankings. Here is how Cal compares to some of the schools it considers its peers.

UC Berkeley	Stanford	Yale	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Student to faculty ratio: 17.37 to 1	Student to faculty ratio: 7.1 to 1	Student to faculty ratio: 6.8 to 1	Student to faculty ratio: 16 to 1
Students	Students	Students	Students
Freshmen 3,735	Freshmen 1,599	Freshmen 1,352	Freshmen 5,418
All undergraduates 22,678	All undergraduates 7,886	All undergraduates 5,278	All undergraduates 24,412
Graduate and professional students 8,599	Graduate and professional students 10,663	Graduate and professional students 5,688	Graduate and professional students 13,691
Cost for undergraduates: Annual in-state fees \$4,046.50, room and board \$8,670. Total \$12,716.50	Cost for undergraduates: Annual tuition \$24,441, room and board \$8,030. Total \$32,471	Cost for undergraduates: Annual tuition \$25,220, \$7,660 room and board. Total \$32,850	Cost for undergraduates: Annual tuition \$6,513, \$5,780 room and board. Total \$12,293.
Six-year graduation rate for students who entered in 1994: 83.1%	Six-year graduation rate for students who entered in 1994: 93.1%	Six-year graduation rate for students who entered in 1994: 94.5%	Six-year graduation rate for students who entered in 1993 (most recent available): 83%
By ethnicity:	By ethnicity:	By ethnicity:	By ethnicity:
African American 57.9%	African American 86.7%	African American 87.6%	African American 59%
American Indian 57.9%	American Indian 58.8%	American Indian 75.0%	Native American 53%
Chicano 72.9%	Hispanic 86.0%	Asian 97.6%	Asian American 87%
Latino 76.5%	Asian 95.8%	Hispanic 91.0%	Hispanic 69%
Asian 88.9%	White, non-Hispanic 94.4%	White, non-Hispanic 95.9%	White, non-Hispanic 86%
White, non-Hispanic 84.6%	Total 93.1%	Unknown 92.9%	Total 83%
Total 83.1%		Nonresident alien 92.7%	
		Total 94.5%	

Note: Total includes those students who decline to state ethnicity, other & international.