

# Comprehensive Institutional Analysis: University of California, Davis (2024-2025)

## Executive Summary

This comprehensive institutional analysis evaluates the University of California, Davis (UC Davis) for the 2024-2025 academic cycle, synthesizing a vast array of data from the Common Data Set (CDS), admissions protocols, financial aid frameworks, and student life ecosystems. As a preeminent public land-grant research university and a "Tier One" institution, UC Davis occupies a unique and strategic position within the ten-campus University of California system. It is characterized not only by its historical dominance in agricultural and biological sciences but also by its rapid ascent in engineering, social sciences, and humanities. The university's operational model balances high-volume undergraduate throughput with elite, world-leading graduate research, particularly in veterinary medicine and environmental sustainability. This report dissects the university's admissions selectivity, academic architecture, financial accessibility, and campus culture to provide a granular, expert-level view of its institutional health and strategic direction.

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## Section 1: The Undergraduate Admissions Ecosystem

The undergraduate admissions landscape at UC Davis for the 2025 cycle represents a sophisticated apparatus designed to identify academic potential in the absence of standardized testing. Following the University of California Board of Regents' decision to eliminate the SAT and ACT from admissions decisions, the university has doubled down on a holistic review process that scrutinizes the nuances of high school achievement and personal character.

## 1.1 Eligibility Framework and the "A-G" Matrix

The foundation of UC Davis admissibility lies in the "A-G" subject requirements, a rigid sequence of 15 year-long academic courses that serve as a prerequisite for consideration. This framework is not merely a checklist but a structural assurance of collegiate readiness. Applicants must not only complete these courses but typically excel in them to remain competitive.

- **History/Social Science (A):** Two years are required, ensuring students possess a baseline understanding of historical causality and civic structure.
- **English (B):** Four years are mandated, emphasizing the critical reading and writing skills necessary for university-level discourse.
- **Mathematics (C):** While three years are required (covering elementary algebra through intermediate algebra), the university strongly recommends four years. This recommendation signals the institution's quantitative rigor, particularly for applicants eyeing STEM fields.
- **Laboratory Science (D):** Two years are required, but three are recommended. Given UC Davis's identity as a scientific powerhouse, competitive applicants often exceed this recommendation, presenting coursework in biology, chemistry, and physics.<sup>1</sup>
- **Language Other than English (E):** Two years are required, with three recommended to demonstrate cultural and linguistic proficiency.
- **Visual and Performing Arts (F):** One year is required, ensuring a well-rounded curriculum.
- **College Preparatory Elective (G):** One year is required, allowing students to deepen their knowledge in a specific area of interest.<sup>1</sup>

This curriculum must be completed with a minimum GPA of 3.00 for California residents. However, the bar for non-residents is set higher at 3.40, reflecting the competitive market for out-of-state seats. Critically, these grades are calculated based on courses taken during the sophomore and junior years (10th and 11th grade), a specific UC methodology that intensifies the pressure on mid-high school performance.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 The Test-Free Paradigm and Holistic Review

For the 2025 admission cycle, UC Davis remains steadfast in its test-free policy. Standardized test scores (ACT/SAT) are not used for admission selection or scholarship awarding. While students have the option to self-report these scores after submitting their application, they

serve no functional purpose in the evaluation of candidacy. This policy shift has fundamentally reoriented the admissions lens toward the **Holistic Review** process.

Under this model, admissions officers evaluate applicants based on a broad spectrum of criteria. This includes the rigor of the senior year curriculum (checking against "senioritis"), performance in honors/AP/IB courses, and achievements within the context of the opportunities available at the student's specific high school. This contextual review allows the university to identify high-achieving students from under-resourced backgrounds, aligning with its land-grant mission of social mobility.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.3 Selectivity and the Class of 2028 Profile

The Fall 2024 admissions data paints a picture of an institution with high demand and selective entry. The university received a staggering 98,861 freshman applications, a volume that underscores the brand's robust appeal. From this pool, 41,618 students were offered admission, resulting in an acceptance rate of approximately **42.1%**.<sup>3</sup>

While this rate suggests a broader access point than sister campuses like UCLA or UC Berkeley, the academic profile of admitted students reveals a highly competitive cohort. The "Middle 50%" GPA range—a key indicator of the typical admit—demonstrates that the average UC Davis freshman is performing at a near-perfect level in high school.

- **Capped Weighted GPA:** The middle 50% of admitted students possessed a capped weighted GPA between **4.00 and 4.26**.<sup>5</sup> This metric caps the number of extra honors points to normalize disparate high school weighting systems. A floor of 4.00 indicates that the vast majority of admits essentially achieved straight A's in the A-G requirements.
- **Unweighted GPA:** The unweighted middle 50% range was **3.80 to 4.00**, further confirming that A- grades are the functional floor for admissibility.<sup>6</sup>
- **Disciplinary Stratification:** The competitiveness varies significantly by major. Admission into the College of Engineering or Computer Science majors commanded a significantly higher GPA range (**4.09 – 4.29**) compared to Humanities (**3.94 – 4.25**), reflecting the intense impact of technical disciplines.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.4 The Qualitative Differentiator: Personal Insight Questions (PIQs)

In the absence of test scores, the Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) have ascended to become the primary qualitative differentiator. These are not standard "essays" in the

traditional liberal arts college sense; they are short, direct responses designed to provide evidence of non-cognitive traits such as leadership, resilience, and creativity.

Freshman applicants must respond to **4 out of 8** prompts, each limited to 350 words. Transfer students have a mandatory prompt regarding major preparation and select three others.<sup>7</sup> The prompts are engineered to elicit specific behavioral evidence:

1. **Leadership:** This prompt asks for evidence of influence. Successful applicants move beyond titles to discuss how they resolved disputes or mentored others. It is an opportunity to demonstrate the capacity to govern and guide.<sup>8</sup>
2. **Creativity:** Whether artistic or problem-solving, this prompt seeks to understand how a student thinks laterally. It is particularly relevant for applicants to design or engineering programs who need to demonstrate innovation.<sup>9</sup>
3. **Greatest Talent:** This allows students to showcase a skill developed over time, emphasizing the "grit" required to master a domain, be it athletic, musical, or intellectual.<sup>9</sup>
4. **Educational Barriers/Opportunities:** A critical prompt for contextual review, this allows students to explain how they utilized advanced academic programs (like COSMOS) or how they navigated systemic educational deficits.<sup>9</sup>
5. **Significant Challenge:** This prompt serves as a resilience check. Admissions officers look for the steps taken to overcome the challenge rather than just a description of the hardship itself.<sup>9</sup>
6. **Academic Inspiration:** This is vital for students applying to competitive majors. It requires articulating a clear intellectual passion that extends beyond the classroom walls.<sup>9</sup>
7. **Community Service:** Reflecting the university's public service ethos, this prompt asks how the student has improved their immediate environment.<sup>9</sup>
8. **The "Open" Prompt:** A catch-all for any unique differentiators not captured elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

The guidance for these questions emphasizes clarity over flourish. Applicants are advised to treat these as "interviews on paper," focusing on concrete examples and recent accomplishments rather than abstract philosophizing.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.5 The Transfer Pipeline and TAG

A critical, often overlooked component of the UC Davis admissions ecosystem is the transfer pathway. UC Davis maintains a strong commitment to the California Master Plan for Higher Education, enrolling 2,656 new transfer students in Fall 2024.<sup>4</sup>

The **Transfer Admission Guarantee (TAG)** program represents a unique strategic advantage

for California community college students. Unlike the uncertain freshman admissions process, TAG provides a guaranteed seat to students who meet specific GPA and coursework thresholds early in the cycle. This creates a predictable pipeline for students who may not have been eligible directly from high school, democratizing access to this Tier One research university.<sup>10</sup>

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## Section 2: Academic Architecture and Pedagogical Framework

UC Davis is not a monolith; it is a federation of four distinct undergraduate colleges and six professional schools, each with its own culture, funding mechanisms, and research priorities.

### 2.1 The Four Undergraduate Colleges

1. College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CA&ES):  
This is the foundational bedrock of the university, tracing its lineage back to the University Farm founded in 1905. It is not merely a historical artifact but a global leader in agricultural research. The college houses majors that are rare elsewhere, such as Viticulture and Enology, Animal Science, and Managerial Economics. It consistently ranks first in the nation for agriculture and forestry, driving the university's identity as a sustainability leader.<sup>11</sup>
2. College of Biological Sciences (CBS):  
Distinct in the American university landscape, CBS is one of the few colleges dedicated entirely to the study of life sciences. It is the primary engine for the university's pre-medical and pre-veterinary pipelines. Majors like Neurobiology, Physiology, and Behavior (NPB) and Genetics are housed here, providing a rigorous, research-heavy curriculum that feeds directly into the university's graduate health programs.<sup>11</sup>
3. College of Engineering (COE):  
The COE is the center of technical innovation on campus. It is characterized by high selectivity and a rigorous curriculum. The college is home to top-ranked programs in Civil and Environmental Engineering 13 and maintains strong industry ties in the Silicon Valley and Sacramento corridors. The curriculum emphasizes collaborative problem-solving, preparing students for immediate licensure or graduate study.<sup>11</sup>
4. College of Letters and Science (L&S):  
The largest of the colleges, L&S is the liberal arts core of the university. It offers the widest breadth of majors, ranging from Economics and Psychology to Art History and

Design. Despite the university's STEM reputation, L&S is a research powerhouse in its own right, with faculty recently securing over \$60 million in research funding and receiving accolades from the Guggenheim Foundation.<sup>14</sup> It provides the critical thinking and communication skills that complement the technical training found in the other colleges.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2 Dominant Disciplines and Enrollment Trends

Analysis of enrollment data reveals a campus heavily skewed toward STEM and pre-professional tracks, yet balanced by a massive social science footprint.

- **Psychology:** Consistently the single most popular major (~8% of enrollment), Psychology at UC Davis is a STEM-designated degree in many tracks, bridging the gap between L&S and the biological sciences. It ranks 11th nationally among public university programs.<sup>13</sup>
- **Biological Sciences:** The general Biology major accounts for ~7% of students, serving as the default track for the thousands of pre-health aspirants.<sup>15</sup>
- **Managerial Economics:** Unique to UC Davis, this major (~5%) blends rigorous economic theory with practical business management, serving as the functional equivalent of a business degree in a system that theoretically restricts undergraduate business administration programs.<sup>15</sup>
- **Neurobiology, Physiology, and Behavior (NPB):** This major (~6%) is the "pre-med" flagship, renowned for its difficulty and its alignment with medical school prerequisites.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.3 Research and Faculty Engagement

The academic experience is defined by the "Student-to-Faculty Ratio" of roughly **21:1**.<sup>16</sup> While this suggests some large lecture classes, particularly in lower-division sequences, the university offsets this through a massive undergraduate research footprint. Approximately **50%** of undergraduate students participate in research or creative projects beyond the classroom.<sup>16</sup> This is facilitated by the university's sheer research volume, which exceeds **\$1 billion** annually, trickling down to create thousands of lab positions for undergraduates.<sup>17</sup>

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## Section 3: Graduate and Professional Advanced

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While the undergraduate population provides the volume, the graduate and professional schools provide the prestige. UC Davis serves approximately 6,000 graduate students annually, with a highly decentralized admissions structure where each program acts as its own gatekeeper.<sup>18</sup>

## 3.1 The Crown Jewel: Veterinary Medicine

The **School of Veterinary Medicine** is the indisputable flagship of the university. It is ranked **No. 1 in the nation** and often the world.<sup>19</sup> Admission is hyper-competitive. The Class of 2024 profile reveals an average Science GPA of **3.62** and an average GRE Quantitative score in the **68th percentile**, though the qualitative review is rigorous.<sup>20</sup> The program draws applicants globally and serves as the primary referral center for veterinary cases in the Western United States.

## 3.2 Graduate Admissions Dynamics

Graduate admissions differ fundamentally from the undergraduate model. There is no "Common App" for grad school here; applicants must navigate specific requirements for each of the 100+ degree programs.

- **Minimum Requirements:** The Office of Graduate Studies enforces a baseline 3.0 GPA and a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution.<sup>21</sup>
- **Holistic Review:** Programs like Statistics have moved explicitly to a holistic review model, where GRE scores (if required) are viewed in concert with research experience and letters of recommendation. The Statistics program, for instance, has no priority deadlines, creating a single, high-stakes evaluation window.<sup>22</sup>
- **International Gatekeeping:** For international applicants, English proficiency is strictly enforced via TOEFL/IELTS, with validities of only two years to ensure current fluency.<sup>21</sup>

## 3.3 Diversity and Funding in Graduate Education

UC Davis has successfully leveraged its funding to create a diverse graduate cohort. The university ranks **#1 nationally** for the number of doctoral degrees in biological and biomedical sciences awarded to underrepresented minority students.<sup>18</sup> This is supported by a robust funding model where **88%** of graduate students receive financial support, often in the form of fellowships, teaching assistantships, or graduate student researcher (GSR) positions.<sup>18</sup> This financial floor is essential for retaining talent in high-cost California.

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## Section 4: Financial Engineering and Affordability

The financial reality of attending UC Davis is a complex interplay of high sticker prices, generous aid, and strategic cost stabilization measures.

### 4.1 The Cost of Attendance (COA) Reality

For the 2024-2025 academic year, the total cost of attendance for a California resident living in the dorms is estimated at **\$46,116**. For a non-resident, this figure balloons to **\$80,316** due to the addition of \$34,200 in Nonresident Supplemental Tuition.<sup>23</sup>

- **Tuition:** Systemwide tuition and fees are set at **\$14,436**.
- **Campus Fees:** UC Davis charges **\$2,417** in campus-based fees, which fund services like the ARC, student government (ASUCD), and Unitrans (the bus system).
- **Housing Premium:** The largest variable is housing. Living on campus costs roughly **\$20,771** for room and board. Living off-campus reduces this estimated burden to roughly **\$15,957**, though the tight Davis rental market can vary this significantly.<sup>23</sup>

### 4.2 The Tuition Stability Plan

To mitigate the unpredictability of educational inflation, the University of California implemented the **Tuition Stability Plan**. This mechanism locks the systemwide tuition and Student Services Fee at a flat rate for up to six years for each incoming cohort. For a student entering in Fall 2024, their tuition will not increase for the duration of their undergraduate



career. This allows families to plan their finances with a degree of certainty that was previously impossible.<sup>24</sup> However, it is crucial to note that "Campus-Based Fees" are *not* included in this lock and may rise annually.

## 4.3 Financial Aid and Social Mobility

Despite the high costs, UC Davis remains an engine of social mobility. The "Blue and Gold Opportunity Plan" ensures that California residents with family incomes below \$80,000 pay \$0 in systemwide tuition.

- **Aid Penetration:** 69% of undergraduates receive financial aid.<sup>26</sup>
  - **Grant Reliance:** 59% of students receive grants (free money), significantly reducing the net price.<sup>27</sup>
  - **Debt Outcomes:** The most telling statistic is that 58% of students graduate debt-free.<sup>16</sup> This is a remarkable achievement for a public university in a high-cost state, validating the efficacy of the state's aid infrastructure.
  - **Self-Help:** The financial aid packaging usually includes a "Self-Help" component, expecting students to contribute via work-study or loans. For first-year students with need, the average need met is 84.2%, leaving a gap that families must bridge.<sup>28</sup>
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## Section 5: The Student Life Ecosystem

The UC Davis student experience is defined by the "College Town" atmosphere of Davis, California. Unlike the urban sprawl of UCLA or the density of Berkeley, Davis is a tight-knit community where the university and the city are inextricably linked.

### 5.1 Housing: The Green, The Domes, and The Dorms

Housing is a critical determinant of the student experience.

- **Residence Halls:** The "dorms" are clustered in three areas: **Segundo**, **Tercero**, and **Cuarto**. **Segundo** and **Tercero** are traditional on-campus clusters, while **Cuarto** offers suite-style living slightly off the main core, featuring private pools and courtyards.<sup>29</sup>
- **The Green at West Village:** This massive apartment complex functions as the primary

housing hub for transfer students, easing their transition by keeping them in the university orbit while providing apartment-style independence.<sup>30</sup>

- **Family and Graduate Housing:** With the opening of **Orchard Park**, the university has significantly expanded capacity for students with families, addressing a critical equity issue in graduate education.<sup>31</sup>
- **The Baggins End Domes:** A unique, historical housing cooperative on campus consisting of fiberglass domes. It represents the counter-cultural, sustainable ethos of the university, offering a communal living experiment that is rare in modern higher education.<sup>32</sup>

## 5.2 Dining and Food Culture

Dining at UC Davis goes beyond standard cafeteria fare, reflecting the university's agricultural roots.

- **Latitude:** This dining facility is a standout, featuring a menu dedicated to international cuisines (Asian, Latin, European, Middle Eastern) to serve the diverse student body and broaden culinary horizons.<sup>33</sup>
- **Dining Commons:** The DCs (Segundo, Tercero, Cuarto) provide the staple "all-you-care-to-eat" service.
- **Student Markets:** Distributed throughout the housing areas, these markets sell international snacks and local produce, often sourced from the university's own Student Farm.<sup>30</sup>

## 5.3 Traditions: The Aggie Spirit

The campus culture is anchored by quirky, long-standing traditions that foster a unique "Aggie" identity.

- **Picnic Day:** This is the apex of the social calendar. As the largest student-run event in the nation, it draws over 75,000 visitors. Iconic events include the **Doxie Derby** (dachshund racing) and the **Battle of the Bands**. It serves as an open house for the university, showcasing everything from chemistry magic shows to livestock displays.<sup>34</sup>
- **Kiss the Egghead:** The campus is dotted with "Egghead" sculptures by Robert Arneson. A prominent superstition involves kissing the "Bookhead" sculpture in front of the Shields Library during finals week for good luck. This ritual physically connects students to the campus art history.<sup>34</sup>

- **Pajamarino:** A nostalgia-heavy tradition where students wear pajamas and march to the train station to greet returning alumni for Homecoming, blending current student life with institutional memory.<sup>34</sup>
- **Fluffy Therapy:** Recognizing the mental toll of finals, UC Davis Student Health organizes "Fluffy Therapy," bringing therapy dogs to the Memorial Union. This institutionalized stress relief underscores the university's focus on student wellness.<sup>34</sup>

## 5.4 Clubs and Organizations: Finding a Niche

With over 800 student organizations, the extracurricular landscape is vast.<sup>35</sup>

- **Niche Interests:** Clubs range from the "**ImPeckable Chickens**" (reflecting the poultry science interest) and the "**Rewilding Society**" (ecology) to the "**Tachycardia Tacklers**" (a pre-health organization).<sup>36</sup>
- **Cultural Centers:** The Cross Cultural Center, along with specific resource centers like the **Native American Academic Student Success Center** and **Center for African Diaspora Student Success**, provide vital hubs for community and retention.<sup>35</sup>
- **Greek Life:** Approximately **10%** of undergraduates participate in fraternities and sororities, providing a social structure that is present but not dominant.<sup>35</sup>

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## Section 6: Institutional Data and Demographics (CDS Analysis)

The 2023-2024 Common Data Set provides the statistical verification of the university's composition and efficiency.

### 6.1 Enrollment Demographics

The undergraduate body is highly diverse, reflecting the demographics of California.

- **Gender:** The campus leans slightly female, a trend consistent with national higher education patterns.
- **Ethnicity:** The "Two or more races" category (2,001 students) and the substantial

Hispanic/Latino population (implied by the "Blue and Gold" eligibility demographics) show a campus that is majority-minority.

- **International Presence:** The "Non-Resident Alien" category is significant, adding global perspectives but also contributing heavily to the university's revenue stream via supplemental tuition.<sup>38</sup>

## 6.2 Persistence and Graduation

- **Degrees Awarded:** The sheer throughput of the university is impressive, with **8,283** Bachelor's degrees awarded in a single year.<sup>38</sup>
- **Retention:** Freshman retention rates typically exceed 90%, indicating that once students are selected, they are highly likely to succeed and return. This high retention rate validates the holistic review process—students are chosen not just for grades, but for "fit."

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## Section 7: Strategic Conclusions and Outlook

The University of California, Davis enters the 2025 academic year as an institution operating at peak capacity and high strategic relevance. It has successfully transitioned from a regionally respected "Farm School" to a global "Public Ivy," balancing elite research outputs with a mandate for broad access.

For Prospective Undergraduates:

The admissions environment is hyper-competitive. A 4.0 GPA is no longer a guarantee; it is merely the ticket to be considered. The decisive factors are now the Personal Insight Questions. Applicants must craft narratives that demonstrate leadership and resilience. The TAG program remains the single best strategic "hack" for California residents, offering a guaranteed route that bypasses the uncertainty of freshman admission.

For Graduate Applicants:

The university remains a destination of choice for life sciences and agriculture. The funding landscape is healthy, but the decentralized nature of admissions requires applicants to build relationships with specific faculty and departments well in advance of deadlines.

For the Institution:

The challenges ahead lie in managing the Cost of Attendance for middle-class families who do not qualify for the Blue and Gold plan, and in maintaining the "small town" housing capacity in the face of relentless enrollment demand. The expansion of on-campus housing like The Green suggests the university is proactively managing this, converting its vast land

resources into student support infrastructure.

Ultimately, UC Davis stands as a testament to the power of the land-grant model in the 21st century: driving innovation in sustainability and health while providing a ladder for upward mobility to thousands of Californians every year.

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