Davis Students and Family Time
Away From Home but Not Away From Home Responsibilities

By Steve Chatman

A Spring 2003 survey of University of California undergraduate students learned that two-thirds spent time each week satisfying family obligations, and that the average time spent on these obligations was just over six hours per week (6.1). These figures were the same for UC Davis undergraduates. Distributed across all students, including those reporting zero hours, the average was 4.1 hours. To put this amount of student time in perspective, it was more than that spent working for pay on campus (3.5), working for pay off campus (4.0), in internships (1.9), doing community service (1.4), in sports or exercise (3.7), participating in student clubs or organizations (2.3), going to movies, concerts, and similar events (2.0), partying (2.0), and watching TV (3.7). Time spent meeting family obligations was clearly an important component of many students’ week, but what were these obligations?

In Fall Quarter, 2003, an open-ended QuickSurvey poll was presented to UC Davis students asking about the nature of family obligations. The results were at first surprising and then obvious given the nature of our student body, but before reviewing the activities described, please note that these should not be considered statistically representative—this was an exploratory study.

To simplify presentation, student responses have been sorted into three categories based on the extent of engagement and contribution: practical, emotional, and in time spent.

**Maintenance**
Activities in the first category demanded a modest expenditure of time and energy and were performed to sustain family relationships. This category was labeled Maintenance and the most frequent obligation was calling or emailing. Activities classified here ranged from calling home once in a while to let them know I’m still alive, to emailing several times a day supplemented with frequent phone calls, and to regular visits to spend time together and to attend holidays and family or ethnic celebrations. It was clear that modern technology and communication services have had a major enabling role in students continuing close relationships with very frequent communication in spite of distance from home.

**Contribution**
The second category was Contribution and identified students providing regular and continuing assistance to their family. Activities in this category included running errands, providing childcare, doing chores and similar significant, but moderately intensive helpful activities. While the amount of time spent was a consideration for this classification, these activities were judged to be important but not essential to the family.
Reliance
The third category was Reliance. Obligations classified in this category were those that the family could not satisfy another way—the family was dependent upon the student’s contribution. One common role in this category was spouse or parent of a young child. Another often mentioned role in the Reliance category was that of translator, bill payer and public negotiator for parents who do not speak English well. While most activities classified as Reliance demanded a large number of hours, this category also included high emotional engagement—instances where the student believed that their behavior was keeping a sibling out of trouble, that their counseling to parents was important to the parents’ coping, and other cases where the student was holding together the family.

Results
Because this was an exploratory study to illuminate a prior survey result, the QuickSurvey was stopped quickly, after about 192 responses were received. Of the first 192 responses, 39% were Maintenance, 33% were Contribution, and 29% were Reliance. This suggests that the family obligations result from the UC survey goes well beyond phone calls and emails on average—not the historic traditional student away from home at a residential college calling home on Sunday scenario.

It was stated earlier that the results were at first surprising and then obvious given the nature of our student body. The results were surprising because they did not confirm or substantiate common conceptions of occasional phone calls and trips home to satisfy a family’s demand for face time. For most students with family obligations, the students are regular contributors to their family’s day-to-day activities and well-being and quite often are a resource on which the family depends. As our students are increasingly first-generation college children of immigrants, the expectations of family and related obligations becomes more extensive. Likewise, admissions policies that recognize young people for success in challenging situations may result in that young person leaving the situation for a time, but have not changed the situation they left.

For example, imagine a bright child of immigrant parents whose family business requires that they work to both provide labor and to serve as accountant, translator and legal negotiator. Furthermore, imagine that the family business provides only a very modest income and that much of that income goes to pay loans and to help other family members. On application, the University might reward the student for academic success in this environment and might help them find financial support to leave home and attend, but the University has not replaced that young person’s contribution to the family. This student might go home every weekend to work, translate, pay bills, and generally continue their prior role even if it necessarily lessened. As evidence of similar cases, several students reported working here to send money home to parents and siblings. In sum, we should not be surprised that the very special applicants we admit are also very important to their families and that the students continue to recognize and meet obligations after matriculation.

This report was compiled by Student Affairs Research & Information (SARI) based on a My.UCDavis QuickSurvey, running from October 17, 2003 through October 24, 2003. The QuickSurvey was available to all undergraduate students. For more detailed information, contact us at (530) 754-7985.