

**We asked some our [peer advisors](#) to reflect back on their decision to come to Cal and what their freshman year was like. Here are their answers!**

**How did you make the decision to come to Cal?**

Bhanu said,

"I chose to go to Cal because I felt that I would be the most challenged here, and I felt that it would be different from my high school experience. Also, the first time I came to Berkeley, I really loved the level of energy I felt, and I thought I would fit in well here!"

Laurel said,

"Out of the schools I was accepted to, I narrowed the choice down to three schools: USC, Pomona, and UCB. I had a large scholarship to USC, but I wasn't sure the academics would be as good as the others. Pomona had a great reputation, but it was a small liberal-arts college and I was sick of going to small private schools (K-12 at a college prep). Berkeley was public, had a good reputation, lots of research opportunities, and a Disabled Students Program. Since I'm out of state, I knew the cost would be high, but the quality of science education and the research opportunities really sealed the deal for me."

Sunil said,

"I chose Cal due to many factors: the location - near the Bay Area and home, the research opportunities and great faculty who are always willing to answer questions and guide students, among other factors."

Gloria said,

"I chose Berkeley mainly because of personal financial concern and my intended major. Since I knew I definitely wanted to complete some graduate work after undergraduate, I wanted to choose a place where I could graduate with the least amount in loans without sacrificing the quality of my education. Also, I knew I wanted to major in MCB when I was choosing among different colleges. My mentor from a summer internship told me that Berkeley's MCB department was very famous and strong, and that definitely contributed to my final decision to enroll in Cal"

Ernie said,

"Choosing CAL was quite simple. CAL was among my top choices among all the universities I applied to. When it came time to select a college, I mainly focused my attention to the university's location, its culture and social climate, as well as the general statistics regarding its student population (average high school GPA, SAT scores, # of undergraduates). This gave me a general sense of the caliber of students at that university, as well as a sense of the area."

"Among my other choices, CAL stood out from the rest. As a Bay Area native (from San Leandro!), the close proximity definitely played an important role. I was close to family and friends, and I was familiar with the surrounding area. Surprisingly, I had only visited Berkeley twice in my life at that time—so the prospect of exploring a new area was still very much alive. Also, I wanted to be immersed in a learning environment that would challenge my academic abilities and excite my curiosity. For example, according to the statistics for incoming freshman for the 2006 academic year, CAL topped all other UCs in measurements of academic success (average GPA, SAT scores, ACT scores, # of AP courses taken, etc). Furthermore, I like to have my options open, and CAL definitely had a large variety of majors to choose from! Some notable majors that caught my attention were Molecular & Cell Biology (its neurobiology emphasis in particular), Haas School of Business, Cognitive Science, and Nutritional Science."

Calvin said,

"I was admitted to both UCLA and Cal. Growing up in Arcadia, a little city in southern California, my goal had always been to go to UCLA. UCLA was comfortable, clean, and familiar. UCLA appealed to me because, in many ways it seemed like it would be a continuation of my high school experience. Home would be 45 minutes away and if anything went wrong I could easily retreat home. Berkeley, on the other hand, was very unfamiliar. The Bay Area weather (cold by my standards), public transportation, and the urban nature of the city were all very new to me. There was also Berkeley's reputation of being a very liberal and wild place. It was definitely out of my comfort zone. Though I wanted college to be a time where I could really grow up and become more independent, I wasn't sure I could handle Berkeley. A chance phone call with an older friend attending Berkeley eased my anxieties. She told me how she liked her professors and classmates and that her overall experience of Berkeley had been a positive one. She also told me about the strength of the MCB department, the department I wanted to major in. In the end, my desire to become more independent, as well as the strong reputation of Berkeley's MCB department, overcame my initial hesitation to come to Cal."

### **What kind of student do you think would thrive at Cal?**

Sunil said,

"Cal is a very diverse campus. Therefore, a student who is willing to adapt to a new lifestyle and

willing to share/collaborate with other students will thrive."

Laurel said,

"You are not babied at Cal. No one holds your hand and tells you what you ought to be doing. If you want that kind of guidance, you have to actively seek it out. I did not start at this school as that kind of person (who sought guidance), and I mostly thrived by learning from my more informed peers, who were used to actively seeking opportunities. People who are coming from schools that did all the planning for you should be aware that public schools are a different environment. You have to constantly be thinking about whether or not you have everything you need to graduate, which groups you ought to be joining, when and how you should be applying for jobs or positions. There are a lot of resources on campus to help you, but you have to have the awareness and drive to find these yourself."

Bhanu said,

"I think someone who is independent and open to new experiences would thrive at Berkeley. Because of the large campus size, it's really important to be flexible and willing to search for what you are interested in, and to work to get the kind of experience you want."

Gloria said,

"I think a student who is independent, motivated, and has well-defined goals are usually very successful at Berkeley. Berkeley provides a lot of opportunities to its students but it does take some searching by the students to figure out where to find and how to use these resources."

Calvin said,

"I think students who are willing to have both their intellect and their worldviews challenged will enjoy Berkeley. Both the school and the city of Berkeley are filled with people and ideas that are very different from my own. However, my values have been greatly solidified because they were challenged."

**Describe your use of AP credit, whether or not you used it, and how.**

Sunil said,

"It is always good to have prior knowledge coming in, but don't count on APs to substitute for studying here at Cal!"

Calvin said,

"In general, I would not recommend passing out of the lower division classes for MCB. They serve to further solidify lots of important concepts. Also, though introductory courses at Berkeley are by no means easy, they do provide those who have taken the corresponding AP courses a smoother transition into upper division courses (since the material is not completely new but is presented/tested in a different way)."

Laurel said,

"I used my AP credits for English only to waive the Reading & Composition requirements (2 courses), and the French AP credits to waive of the Foreign Language requirement. For the MCB major, I opted to take Chem 1A and Bio 1A despite the fact I could have passed out of them. I strongly feel students should take Bio 1A at Berkeley, even having taken AP Biology. There's no comparison between the two."

Bhanu said,

"I took a fair number of AP classes in high school, which was great because I was able to only take 3 classes each semester at Berkeley, and still graduate on time. This allowed me to get involved in extracurricular activities that I was interested in, which was great because I had the opportunity to try a few different activities and ultimately found a few that I really cared about. I did not use any of my AP credits toward required classes, only toward my total number of units required for graduating. Having the AP background definitely helped a lot with introductory classes in my first semesters at Berkeley."

Gloria said,

"I don't think your AP score is a good way to determine if you should use your AP credit or not. I did use my AP Calculus BC credit (*for placement purposes*) and I did fine in my math classes here at Cal. However, my high school offered difficult math classes and I did take another year of math (linear algebra and multi-calculus) after my AP calculus class."

"Another factor students should consider is their post-graduate plans. For example, medical school requires a year of writing classes taken in college and even if you have AP English credits, you still need to take a year of writing classes to satisfy the medical school requirement. In terms of which courses I would recommend using AP credit for, Again it really depends on the student's background. I would recommend freshmen look at the course materials (textbooks, readers..etc) and tests for courses that they want to use their AP credit for and then make a decision."

**What was your freshman year like? How many units did you enroll in?**

Calvin said,

"My freshman year was a year of a lot of growth. The most concrete example of this would be learning how to share a room with two other room-mates. I also had to learn to manage my own finances, plan my own schedule, do my own laundry, etc. In short, I learned to be a lot more independent. I took 13 units my first semester and was able to do well in all my classes. I think this was a good course load because there were so many non-academic things to get use to."

Laurel said,

"My freshman year was a great time. At first I felt a bit isolated, just because the new living environment was a shock to my system, but after a while it felt like a really fun, perpetual summer camp. All the students on my dorm floor bonded a lot and we did everything together. At first I had some friends outside of the floor, but I found that I spent almost all my time with my floor-mates. I was in the [Fall Program for Freshmen \(FPF\)](#) program and it definitely had a different feel than the classes on campus, but it was a nice transition from high school to college courses."

"I took 16 units my first semester and felt overwhelmed, so I took 12 hours my second semester, through the Disabled Students Program's course load reduction. I found this was okay, but it gave me too much time to goof off. I started a relationship, and that can be highly distracting from school. I think I should have taken around 14 units instead that second semester. I ended up taking Chem 3A/AL over the summer in order to catch up with my MCB schedule, since the FPF didn't offer any science classes."

Bhanu said,

"I had a really good time my freshman year! Living independently is a new experience, but as long as you stay grounded and find a good balance, it works out just fine. I think a first semester student should enroll in 13 units, because there are so many other things going on during the first semester that it's important to make sure you have time to balance academics with extracurricular and social activities."

Sunil said,

"My freshman year was pretty hectic because it was my first time living away from my family. Doing normal chores, like laundry, etc. were difficult at first sight, but things got better as the year progressed. One thing I would recommend is not to get involved with a million clubs your first semester. Try to adjust to Cal first and enjoy your first semester."

Gloria said,

"My first semester was very relaxing. I only had three lecture classes (Math 1B, Chem 1A, and an English class), a freshman seminar, and some independent research units. I had a lot of time to go out and meet new people because I felt quite comfortable with the course load I was taking. My second semester was more stressful because I was taking a heavier load (Math 54, Chem 3A/3AL, Biology 1B, Psychology 2, and research). In general I would recommend freshmen to try to take at least 3 lecture classes that can be used toward either the major or university requirement. I think it is always nice to finish up the requirements early on so there could be more flexibility in the future (ex. decision to declare double majors, study abroad, or just become more involved in extracurricular activities)."

### **How did you find your community at Cal?**

Laurel said,

"I made a couple friends in my major classes, and always through lab and discussion. I think it's hard to make friends during large lectures. I found my community almost entirely through my dorm floor, with my floor-mates. They would bring over friends and I would meet them and really hit it off. When I moved out of the dorms, I became a lot less social. With harder classes and less social accessibility, it's hard to keep up with people except your closest friends."

Bhanu said,

"I found my community through dorms and extracurricular activities. Dorms are a really unique way of living and meeting people, so if you have the opportunity to do this, it's a great experience! Extracurricular activities are also a great way to meet people, and one of the great things about being at Berkeley is the vast array of extracurricular options available to you; there's something for everyone and if you try different things, you will absolutely find something you are passionate about."

Gloria said,

"I think the community at Cal was very welcoming when I first moved. The dorm experience during freshmen year was very memorable and gave me a lot of chances to meet other students. Because of the number of students enrolled at Berkeley, building a community can be quite overwhelming at first. However, once I found my own niche (extracurricular activities like clubs, research lab, work study jobs..etc), I started to appreciate the rich community Berkeley has that allowed me to meet all different kinds of people."

Calvin said,

"These past 3 years at Cal have been the best of my life not because of the major I chose or the classes I took, but because of the community that I was able to form with my friends and mentors at Acts2Fellowship, an on-campus Christian fellowship. I came to Cal intimidated, insecure, and with the mindset that college was just about getting good grades. I never imagined being welcomed into a loving community full of older brothers and sisters who would guide me through college, help me grow as a person, and ask tough life questions. I recognize just how blessed I have been to be a part of this community even though I wasn't looking for it when I decided to come to Cal."

**Did any of your high school experiences prepare you for Cal?**

Laurel said,

"I think that my high school experience prepared me well for the academic rigor at Berkeley. Beyond that, I don't really think any high school experience can prepare you for the other aspects of college, like dorm life and living independently, so I think it always takes a few weeks to get used to that."

Sunil said,

"I think my school definitely prepared me for Cal. I am very happy I enrolled in IB/AP courses because the studying habits I developed definitely help me now."

Gloria said,

"In terms of preparation in high school, I think the single most important thing was the math and science courses I took before coming to Berkeley. They gave me a solid foundation to prepare for the classes in Berkeley. Also, I was a summer intern in a research lab when I was in high school and this experience really helped me to determine what major I wanted to pursue very early on. However, that is an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time because I later found out that I am also interested in other fields of science and I wish I was more open minded about exploring different science classes when I just came to Cal."

Calvin said,

"In terms of academics, I was prepared very well by my high school AP classes. Learning to study and budget your time, however, is a skill each student needs to master for themselves. One thing I would recommend for those students considering MCB would be to get some lab experience, however mundane or basic, before they come to Berkeley. This will allow them to more easily obtain a research position at Berkeley."

**If I knew then what I know now .....**

Laurel said,

"I wish I had gotten into undergraduate research a lot sooner, because that's what's really critical to go to graduate school. I also wish I had used such resources as the [Student Learning Center \(SLC\)](#) and learned to study better. I came to college with terrible studying skills and let myself get some so-so grades, and it took about 2 years before I really learned which studying habits worked for me."

Bhanu said,

"If I knew then what I know now, I would get more involved in extracurricular activities beginning with my first semester. It takes time to find activities you are excited about, and you only experience college once, so it's important to find things you really love!"

Gloria said,

"I wish I knew that though the classes at Berkeley are challenging, they are do-able and I should have been more open minded about exploring different varieties of classes instead of being so concerned about my GPA. I wish I had taken more classes during my 1st and 2nd year that were prerequisites for classes I could have taken later. This would have allowed me to have more flexibility later on."

Calvin said,

"If I knew then what I knew now...I would have tried to connect with my room-mates and floor-mates from freshmen year more. Because I was so anxious about doing well in school, I declined lots of invitations to hang out or a grab snack because I wanted to study. I did very well my freshmen year but in retrospect I would have traded a few points off a midterm for the chance to connect with others during my freshmen year."