

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This is the 16th cooperative study undertaken by the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC). Since 1996, the survey has run in a three-year cycle, with different student populations targeted each year: all undergraduates, first-year undergraduate students, and graduating students. This year's study presents the results for students in their first year of university in 2010 and compares results to the last three surveys of first-year students, conducted in 2007, 2004, and 2001.

The 2010 survey involved 39 universities. To participate, universities provided PRA Inc. with first names and email addresses for a random sample of up to 1,000 first-year students. Overall, the response rate for the 2010 survey was 39%, producing a sample of 12,488 students. The response rate is lower than that for the 2007 CUSC Survey of First-Year Students (45%).

Profile of first-year students

According to the survey, the typical first-year student is an 18-year-old, English-speaking female. Overall, female students outnumber male students by almost two to one, which is similar to results of past CUSC surveys of first-year students. Although female students are more common in our sample, for the most part, the experience and attitudes of students are very similar, regardless of gender.

Overall, 25% of students report being part of a visible minority, 4% identify themselves as Aboriginal people, and 7% of students self-report as having a disability.

In their first year of university, about half of students (47%) continue to live with their parents (or some other relative or guardian). Slightly more are living independently in either on-campus housing (37%) or rented accommodations (14%). Even among those who are not living on campus, there appears to be a strong desire to do so, as 28% of those who do not live on campus say they would if they had the opportunity. Regardless of where students go to school, the vast majority, about 9 in 10, stay in their home province to attend university.

About 7 students in 10 report that their father (68%) or mother (71%) had completed at least some post-secondary education. Slightly more than 1 in 10 students (14%) are first-generation students; that is, neither their father nor their mother took any post-secondary education.

Most students graduated from high school or CEGEP in the same year they began their first year of university. In other words, they went immediately from high school or CEGEP graduation to university in the fall, as 80% of students graduated from high school or CEGEP in 2009 or later. About 85% of students registered with a full course load, and about 10% of students switched to a partial load by the time of the survey.

Many students are finding university more academically challenging than high school or CEGEP. While 7 students in 10 report an average grade of A- or higher in high school or CEGEP, 1 in 3 expects such an average at the end of their first year of university. Typically,

students expect an average grade of slightly lower than a B+ at the end of first-year university, while the average grade achieved in high school or CEGEP was an A-.

Financing education and current employment

About half of students (51%) received a scholarship, financial award, or bursary for the 2009–10 academic year. Among those who received a scholarship, financial award, or bursary, almost 3 in 10 (29%) say they would not have been able to attend university without one.

Almost 4 in 10 students report being employed in the current academic year. Among employed students, the typical students work about 14 hours a week. About 3 in 10 employed students report that their work has a negative impact on their academic performance, including 3% who say it has a very negative impact. However, for 1 in 7 (14%), their work positively impacts their academic performance, including 5% who say it has a very positive impact.

Reasons motivating attendance and choice of university

We asked students to rate the importance of eight reasons for deciding to attend university. Almost all students (99%) report that at least one of these reasons was very important in their decision to attend university. Indeed, multiple reasons often play a role. For example, over half of the students (52%) rate five or more reasons as very important. Among the eight reasons, future employment appears to be the main motivation for students to attend university. About two-thirds of students say that either *preparing for a specific job or career* (43%) or *getting a good job* (24%) is the single most important reason for going to university.

We asked students to rate the importance of 17 different reasons for deciding to attend their current university. While many reasons are very important to students, when asked to choose one reason as the most important, three key reasons emerge: *specific career-related programs* (22%); *wanted to live close to home* (19%); and *quality of academic programs* (17%).

When selecting a university, about 6 students in 10 (58%) report applying to more than one. Among students who applied to more than one university, the average number was about three. Not only did students often apply to more than one university, a few (10%) also applied to a college. However, it appears that applying to many universities may simply have been a safety net for students, as the vast majority of first-year students (83%) report that they are attending their first choice of university.

Just over half of students (53%) say they received direct contact from their university before they graduated from high school or CEGEP, most of whom received such contact in Grade 12. When it comes to deciding which university to attend, students are divided about which contact was most important when making their decision. No single type of contact is rated as most important by more than 1 in 5 students. The most important types of contact tend to be divided between students' experiences, such as *campus visits and open houses* (19%), and information from others, such as *word of mouth* (17%) and *advice from high school guidance counsellors or teachers* (13%).

Experience prior to class

Almost all students (90%) report being at least somewhat satisfied with their university's handling of their application for admission, including 60% who are very satisfied.

About half of students (54%) report receiving assistance from their university before or while first registering. Among those who received such assistance, more than 9 in 10 (92%) report being at least somewhat satisfied, including 46% who are very satisfied.

Students often used multiple methods to register. While almost all students registered *online* (90%), many also registered *in person* (30%), *by mail* (20%), or *by phone* (16%). Regardless of the method, at least 3 students in 4 were satisfied with the registration process they experienced. More than 8 in 10 students say they are satisfied with being able to get into all of the courses they wanted to, including 44% who say they are very satisfied.

Two first-year students in 3 (66%) participated in a university orientation program. The vast majority of students who attended orientations report being satisfied with various aspects of the session. Students are most satisfied with their orientation in terms of *making them feel welcome to the university* (94%), and are least satisfied with how it *built their confidence* (77%).

University experience

We asked students to rate their success with a wide variety of personal, academic, and practical adjustments to university. Of the seven academic adjustments rated, students report having the most success *understanding content and information presented in courses* (96% report success), and the least success *getting academic advice* (71%).

Most students also report having at least some success in adjusting to personal aspects of university life, reporting the most success *organizing their time to complete academic work* (84%), and the least success *becoming involved in campus activities* (53%).

Most students report having at least some success with practical adjustments, although they report the least amount of success *finding useful information and resources on careers and occupations*. While 65% report having at least some success, just 22% says that they have had very much success in this regard.

On average, first-year students report that they are at least somewhat satisfied with the concern shown by their university for them as individuals, as just over 7 students in 10 (72%) are satisfied with the concern shown by their university for them as individuals. This includes 29% who are very satisfied. About 1 student in 5 is dissatisfied, including 6% who are very dissatisfied.

In terms of facilities and services at universities, the vast majority of students are satisfied. Of the services and facilities tested, at least 8 in 10 students are satisfied with these services, with the exception of their *university's commitment to environmental sustainability* (77%), *food services* (72%), and *parking facilities* (57%).

As we have seen in previous CUSC surveys, the vast majority of students report positive experiences with university faculty. At least 8 in 10 students agree with statements about their professors, and about 3 in 10 strongly agree.

Given students' satisfaction with many aspects of their university experiences, it is not surprising that more than 9 students in 10 (93%) agree that they are satisfied with their decision to attend their university, including about 45% who strongly agree. For most, their experience at their university has *met* (64%) or *exceeded* (25%) their expectations, with few reporting that their experiences *fell short* (11%).

Although most are satisfied with their experiences, slightly fewer (86%) plan on returning to their university for the following academic year. However, almost all of those who do not indicate that they plan on returning (11%) are undecided, with just a few (3%) having decided not to return.

Conclusion

Generally, students at Canadian universities report having positive experiences in their first year of university. As such, these results reflect much of what we found in previous CUSC surveys with first-year university students. While there are areas that might be improved, most students report that their universities fulfilled their expectations and that they are satisfied with their choice of university.