

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This is the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 who graduated in the fall of 2008 or are graduating in 2009. The last CUSC survey of graduating students was conducted in 2006.

The 2009 survey involved 34 universities. Traditionally, the survey was a paper-based one, which universities mailed to students. This year marks the first CUSC survey that all participating institutions conducted using an online version of the questionnaire. To participate, universities provided PRA Inc. with the first name and email addresses for a random sample of up to 1,000 graduating students. PRA managed the online survey, which involved liaising with universities and the company that hosted the online survey.

Overall, the response rate for the 2009 survey was 45% and produced a sample of approximately 12,160 students. The response rate was identical to 2006 (45%), when half of participating universities conducted the survey using the paper-based version of the questionnaire.

### **Profile of graduating students**

In 2009, the typical graduating student is a 24-year-old single female studying in English. Two-thirds of responding students are female, the other one-third are male. Although the average age is slightly less than 24, 8 in 10 students are 24 years of age or younger. Almost 9 students in 10 are single, that is, are not married or living common-law and, in their last undergraduate year, about 6 in 10 students are living independently. The remaining 4 students in 10 live with their parents or relatives.

Even though many students are not living with their parents, they typically do not relocate great distances to attend university. Indeed, the vast majority of students report attending a university in their province of permanent residence.

Many students are majoring in generalist disciplines, such as Social Science and Arts and Humanities, although many other disciplines are represented in the survey. Most students are attending university full-time, taking a four-year degree program (but over a slightly longer period), studying in English, and graduating with a B+ average.

Although the average length of students' programs is about four years, the typical student has spent additional time at his/her current university, having attended the institution for an average of almost five years. In addition, many students report starting their post-secondary studies prior to studying at their current university. This may be partly explained by the fact that some students are part-time, but also that almost one-quarter of students interrupted their studies for one or more terms during their post-secondary studies.

Almost one-fifth of graduating students are first-generation students; that is, neither their mother nor their father had any post-secondary education.

## Experiences at university

We asked students to assess the contribution of 17 activities they may have experienced during their university studies to their personal growth and development. For the most part, students think that these experiences at their university, especially experiences with faculty, have contributed to their personal growth and development.

Of the 17 activities tested, three stand out as contributing very much to students' personal growth and development: *faculty knowledge of discipline*, *faculty enthusiasm for material*, and *classroom instruction*. In each case, at least 6 in 10 of those who provide a rating indicate that these activities contributed very much to their personal growth and development. For example, of those who rate faculty's knowledge of their discipline, 65% indicate that such programs contributed very much to their growth.

## Extracurricular activities

We asked students to rate the impact of 17 extracurricular activities on their personal growth and development. In general, most students rate most extracurricular activities as having little impact on their growth and development, with a few exceptions.

Among students who have experience with extracurricular activities, the activities that have the greatest impact are: *participating in international placements or exchanges* and *interacting with other students*. In each case, more than 6 in 10 of those who provide a rating indicate that the activity contributed very much to their personal growth and development. However, only 12% of students have experience *participating in international placements or exchanges*, whereas almost all (99%) of students have experience *interacting with other students*.

## Use of and satisfaction with facilities and services

We asked students to rate their use of and satisfaction with 17 different facilities and services at their universities. Some services, by their very nature, are used by almost all students, while others are used by students who specifically require these services.

Overall, the majority of students who used the services are satisfied with each of those tested. The services with the highest proportion of students who indicate that they are very satisfied are: services for students with disabilities; library facilities; campus medical services; services for co-op program, internship, or other program-related practical experience; and services for international students. Among those students with experience using each service, 1 in 3 or more reports that they are very satisfied with that service.

## **Skill growth and development**

We asked students to grade their universities in terms of contributing to their growth and development of 31 specific skills.

Students provide the highest grades to their universities for contributing to growth and development in terms of providing a broad knowledge of their major field of study and thinking critically. In each case, almost 9 students in 10 rate their university as good or excellent in this regard.

On average, universities also receive high marks from students for contributing to students' growth and development in terms of: written communications, skills for planning and completing projects, commitment to lifelong learning, interpersonal skills, working independently, and oral communications skills. In each case, among the students who provide a rating, at least 8 out of 10 rate their university as doing a good or excellent job.

Universities also receive good marks from students for contributing to students' growth and development in the following areas: accepting people from different cultures, identifying and solving problems, effective study and learning skills, ability to access information, ability to understand abstract reasoning, cooperative group interaction, persistence with difficult tasks, moral and ethical development, personal self-confidence, and personal time management. In each case, among the students who provide a rating, at least 7 in 10 rate their university as doing a good or excellent job.

Universities receive lower marks for understanding national and global issues, leadership skills, computer literacy skills, living in an international world, preparation for postgraduate study or professional school, ability to address issues in personal life, general skills and knowledge relevant for employment, analyzing quantitative problems, understanding and applying scientific principles and methods, and specific employment-related skills and knowledge. In each case, among the students who provide a rating, at least 6 in 10 rate their university as doing a good or excellent job.

Students rate their universities particularly poorly in terms of their institutions' contribution to growth and development in five areas: appreciation of the arts, mathematical skills, second or third language skills, spiritual development, and entrepreneurial skills. In each case, about half or less rate their university as doing a good or excellent job. In the cases of entrepreneurial skills and spiritual development, about 4 in 10 rate their university as doing at least a good job.

From a list of 20 factors, we asked students to identify the two most important areas for a student's growth and development. Students' priorities are diverse, and no one factor is seen as most important to more than 3 in 10 students. The top three factors in terms of importance as chosen by students are: personal self-confidence, personal time management skills, and identifying and solving problems.

## Student satisfaction

Many students credit their university with playing an important role in their growth and development. Thus, it is not surprising that, for the most part, students are satisfied with their university experiences.

Most students are very positive about their experience with their professors. In particular, students are most positive about professors *seeming knowledgeable in their fields, being reasonably accessible outside of class, and being well organized with their teaching*. Many students also report that some professors have a major positive influence on their academic career.

Students' generally positive assessment of their professors reflects the fact that the vast majority of students are satisfied with the quality of the teaching they received from their university (91%) and agree that their learning experience at university was intellectually stimulating (91%). According to students, the only area of weakness with some of their professors is that they are not knowledgeable of career opportunities in their field. While a majority agree with the statement, about 1 student in 5 disagrees.

As previously discussed, most students believe that interaction with other students has contributed very much to their personal growth and development. Thus, it is important to note that most (87%) also report that they are satisfied with the opportunity to develop lasting friendships. Students also are satisfied with their personal safety on campus (94%) and with their university's commitment to environmental sustainability (80%).

However, students indicate a couple of areas of concern. Many students (41%) are dissatisfied with the concern shown by their university for them as individuals, and many (43%) report that they sometimes feel they get the run-around from their university. While most (75%) feel that they are part of their university, a considerable number (25%) do not. Also, about one-third (32%) disagree that their university provides them with good value for their money.

In spite of some of these shortcomings, the vast majority of students generally report being satisfied (90%) with the overall quality of education they received at their university, and almost as many say their university has met (61%) or exceeded (24%) their expectations. Most say they are satisfied (90%) with their decision to attend their university. These positive impressions are further reflected in the fact that 89% of students would recommend their university to others.

## **Education financing and debt**

Almost 6 in 10 students report having some debt from financing their education, most often from student loans. Overall, the average amount of debt per student is just under \$15,500. Among those reporting debt, the average amount per student is just below \$26,700. Over time, the amount of debt students have accumulated at graduation from their undergraduate program appears to be increasing at a rate that exceeds inflation. On average, between 2000 and 2009, overall student debt increased 37%. During the same period, the cost of living increased 21%.

The most common source of debt is student loans, as 4 students in 10 report such debt. As well, student loans account for 56% of all reported student debt, while loans from financial institutions (21% of all debt) and loans from parents or family (18% of all debt) account for almost all of the students' remaining debt.

Thinking about their current year of studies, we asked students to indicate which of 11 sources they are using to help pay for their university education. On average, students report using between 2 and 3 different sources to fund their current year. The most commonly used sources of funding are parents or other family members (50%), although at least one-third of students report relying on earnings from summer or current employment; government loans or bursaries; or university scholarships, awards, or bursaries. On average, students' reported sources contribute just over \$12,000 to their current year.

Credit cards can be another source of debt, and almost 9 students in 10 report having at least one credit card. About 3 in 4 of those who have credit cards report regularly paying off their balance each month. Among all students with at least one credit card, the average balance owing on their credit cards is \$760. However, among students who report a balance, the average amount owing is four times as much, at just over \$3,400.

About 6 students in 10 are currently employed, most often off-campus. Students who are employed spend an average of 18 hours a week working. Students' workload appears to affect some differently than others, as 29% say this work has a negative impact on their academic performance, while 32% say it has a positive impact. For the most part, this difference appears to be due to the number of hours students work in a week, as those who work more hours are more likely to report their employment has a negative impact on their academic performance.

## Future education and employment

As mentioned earlier, many students are dissatisfied with faculty in terms of their knowledge of career opportunities in their field. Similarly, many students report that their university as a whole is not as knowledgeable as it could be about career opportunities. While close to 2 students in 3 are satisfied with their university's knowledge of career options in their area of study, the remaining 1 in 3 are dissatisfied.

Most students are somewhat prepared for employment, as demonstrated by the fact that some 3 students in 4 have created a resume or curriculum vitae, and almost 6 in 10 have spoken to one of their professors about employment. However, many have not decided what they want to do with their lives; only 6 students in 10 report having a specific career field. For many, this decision does not yet have to be made, since half of students intend to continue their education in the first year after graduating.

About 1 graduating student in 3 has arranged for full- or part-time employment other than a summer job, including 23% who have arranged a full-time job. Slightly less than half of all students were seeking work at the time of the survey. Of those with full-time jobs, about 6 in 10 report that these jobs are permanent. Among the students who have arranged full- or part-time employment, half report that a degree in their area of study was required, while slightly more, about 6 students in 10, report that their degree helped them get their job. Two students in 3 report that their job is related to the knowledge and skills acquired from study at university. Among those with an arranged job, their university education appears to be more relevant to those who have arranged full-time, rather than part-time, jobs.

Among those with arranged jobs, almost 9 students in 10 are satisfied with them, including 4 in 10 who are very satisfied with their job. On average, students with arranged jobs anticipate earning almost \$36,600 annually, although the amount is considerably lower for those with part-time (about \$25,700) than full-time employment (about \$40,700).

Among all students, a majority, 6 in 10, believe there are at least some jobs in Canada in their major area of study. However, about 3 students in 10 feel there are few or very few jobs in their field of study.

## Conclusion

Although the report highlights some areas for improvement, graduating students are generally satisfied with their university and have had positive experiences while attending it. As noted, the vast majority would recommend their university to others, suggesting that students typically believe that the years they spent working toward their undergraduate degree were worthwhile.