

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research involves almost 12,000 undergraduate students attending 1 of 31 participating universities from across Canada. The survey was conducted, depending on the university, with a random sample of up to 1,000 students attending in the 2007-08 academic year. Of those who were asked to participate, over 40% completed a survey.

Personal profile of undergraduate students

The typical undergraduate student is a 22-year-old female. Indeed, female students outnumber male students by two to one. This is similar to past CUSC surveys of students. Although they are more common in our sample, for the most part, the experience and attitudes of female students appear to be similar to those of male students. Overall, 19% of students report being part of an ethnic or cultural group that might be considered a visible minority and 3% report being Aboriginal (that is, First Nations, Métis, or Inuit). About 8% of students self-report as having a disability, most commonly a learning or mental health disability. Some 6% report having children.

The vast majority of students attend a university in their home province, ranging from 67% in Alberta to 94% in Manitoba. Most undergraduate students are living independently either in rented accommodations (37%) or on-campus housing (18%). Some 28% of students continue to live with their parents (or some other relative or guardian).

On average, students take about 23 minutes to commute to their university's campus and use a variety of methods of transportation. About 33% commute by vehicle, while 29% walk to campus and 27% use public transportation.

Most students report that at least one of their parents has some post-secondary training. About 4 students in 10 report that at least one parent has completed a university degree, including 21% of students who report that both parents have completed a university degree. Another 1 in 3 says that at least one of their parents has no post-secondary education, including 13% who say neither parent has any post-secondary education.

Academic profile

Most students report majoring in Arts and Humanities (24%), Social Science (22%), Business (13%), or Biological Science (13%) programs. Among the nine disciplines into which students were categorized, female students are overrepresented in Professional and Education programs, while male students make up the majority only in Engineering and Physical Science programs. Most students are studying in English (84%) with a few studying in French (4%).

Almost all students are attending university full-time (92%). On average, students began their post-secondary studies four years ago, but started at their current university three years ago. This suggests that some students began their post-secondary studies at another institution before their current studies. About 1 student in 5 reports having had to interrupt their studies at some time. The most common reasons for interruption relate to finances, either for employment (7%) or financial reasons (5%).

The average grade for all undergraduates is between a B and a B+. More than half of students report an average grade of B+ or higher, including 12% with an average grade of A or A+. Only 7% of students report an average grade of C or lower. As students progress in their studies, their grade average tends to increase.

Most students spend a considerable amount of time each week working on their education. On average, students spend about 33 hours a week on academics both in (16 hours) and out of class (17 hours), which is almost the equivalent of a full-time job. As students progress in their studies, they spend less time on average in class and more time on academic work outside of class.

Students have experienced a variety of types of instruction. They are most familiar with courses that include *classroom instruction with online supports* (80%) and *classroom based instruction* (71%). Fewer have experience with courses that are a mix of *classroom and online instruction* (16%) or *online only* (11%). Regardless of the type of instruction, the majority of students are satisfied with each, although each has its unique benefits according to students. For example, courses with a classroom component allow for interactions between professors and students, while courses with an online component allow students to work at their own pace, when they want to. However, if asked to select one type of instruction, 2 students in 3 prefer *classroom instruction with online support*.

Work and financing education

Almost half (49%) of undergraduate students are currently employed, most commonly working off campus (35%). Many are not currently employed, but are not seeking employment (32%). Students who are employed work an average of 17 hours per week. Part-time students (77%) are more likely than full-time students (51%) to be employed and, on average, work more hours in a typical week (30 hours for part-time, 15 for full-time students). About 60% of those who are working say that their employment has at least some negative impact on their academic performance.

Many undergraduate students have not made a decision about a career. While a slim majority (53%) report that they have decided on a career path, many others report that they may have decided (28%) or have not decided (11%). Some students are optimistic about their job prospects, saying that many jobs (34%) are available in their chosen career field. Others are more pessimistic saying that there are only some jobs (35%) in their field or that they believe there are few jobs (16%).

Students report taking many steps to prepare for their career or employment. Indeed, 82% of students report taking at least one of the eight steps, including 49% who have taken three or more steps. Most commonly students report *creating a resume or CV* (53%), *talking with professors about employment or career* (46%), or *volunteering* (38%) or *working* (37%) *in their chosen field*. Not surprisingly, as students progress in their studies and get closer to graduation, they are more likely to have taken part in many of the steps to prepare for employment. Still many students in the fourth or fifth year of their program have not taken steps in preparation for their careers. For example, only 67% of students in fourth or fifth year have a resume.

About half of all undergraduate students (49%) report having at least some debt resulting from their university education. The most common source of debt is government student loans, which 34% of all students report using. Other common sources of debt are loans from parents or family (17%) and loans from financial institutions (14%). On average, students with debt report owing almost \$19,000 and, typically, as students progress in their studies, their debt load increases.

In terms of financing their education, students tend to use multiple sources to fund their current year of university. Of the eleven funding sources identified, on average, students use three. That being said, almost half of students (45%) rely on three or more sources to fund their university education. The most common source is parents, family, or a spouse (44%). Other common sources include earnings from summer work (42%), university scholarships, bursaries, or awards (33%), or government loans or bursaries (31%). On average, students report receiving about \$11,100 from these and other sources.

Credit cards appear to be a common source of managing cash flow as about 65% of students report having at least one credit card. However, credit cards do not seem to be a major source of debt for most students. About 78% of students with credit cards say that they pay off their balance each month, although the average outstanding balance for those who do not pay off their credit card each month is almost \$3,000.

Since most students depend on multiple sources of funding, perhaps it is not surprising that 65% of students have at least some concern about having sufficient funds to complete their education. The loss of any one source could prevent them from completing their university education.

Perceptions of university

In general, students tend to have a positive impression of most aspects of their university.

- ▶ The vast majority of students are satisfied with the process of registering for courses (80%), although fewer are satisfied with course availability (68%).
- ▶ Most students report being satisfied – although not necessarily very satisfied – with key educational services and facilities at their institutions. A majority of students are satisfied with academic facilities such as average class sizes (93%), instructional facilities (84%), and the general condition of buildings and grounds (83%). Fewer students, although still a majority, are satisfied with the social and informal meeting places (77%) and available study space (72%).
- ▶ A majority of students are also satisfied with most other university facilities and special services offered such as *computer facilities* and *library facilities*. As has been the case in all surveys, students are less satisfied with practical services such as *parking* and *food services*. In fact, only 52% of students who have used the *parking facilities* are satisfied with them. These two facilities also most commonly identified as the areas needing the greatest improvement.
- ▶ Relatively few students report using many of the special services tested. That said, most students who use these services are satisfied. Special services include such things as *study skill support services*, *employment services*, and *tutoring services*. Those services that

students tend to be less satisfied with are those that are intended to be used by specific student populations, such as *services for students with disabilities* (71% satisfied) and *services for First Nations students* (62%).

Generally, students have had good experiences with their professors. More than 85% of students report that professors encourage student participation in class (92%), are accessible outside of class to help students (92%), and show sensitivity to racial (89%) or gender (86%) issues. Students are least likely to agree that they can turn to their professors for advice on personal matters (49%). This generally positive perception of professors is also reflected in the fact that 88% of students agree that they are satisfied with the quality of teaching they have experienced at their university, including 21% who strongly agree.

The vast majority of students also have positive impressions of their universities in terms of treating students fairly, independently of race or gender (over 95% in both cases). They also feel that they have had an intellectually stimulating experience at their university (89%). However, about half (49%) believe that sometimes their university gives them the run around.

We asked students to rate the need for improvement of ten facilities and services at their university. In general, less than half of students say that any of the areas tested need much or very much improvement. From this list of services and facilities tested, we asked students to rank the top three in terms of requiring the greatest need for improvement. The top three are: *emphasis on teaching excellence* – almost half of students selected this as an area that requires the greatest improvement; *university spending on financial aid* – slightly more than 4 students in 10 indicate this as a top priority for improvement; and *sense of community among students* – about 1 student in 3 says the community among students is one of the top priorities for improvement at their university.

University experience

Generally, students' involvement in on-campus, non-academic activities appears to be restrained. Although most students report attending events occasionally, few are often involved in any one activity. For example, 7 students in 10 have *attended campus social events* at least occasionally in the current academic year, including 21% who have done so often or very often. Indeed, no more than 23% of students report attending any of the seven activities often or very often. Students are often involved in community service or volunteer activities either on or off campus. Almost half (49%) report that they spend some hours in a typical week involved in such activities.

We asked students to rate their university's contributions to their personal growth and development in 24 different areas. Typically universities receive an average rating of a C+ on most items tested, suggesting that they are doing a fair to good job.

- ▶ On average, universities tend to receive the highest score for contributing to students' growth and development in terms of *working independently* and *thinking logically and analytically*. About 8 students in 10 rate their university as excellent or good for *working independently*, while about 3 in 4 provide the same ratings for *thinking logically and analytically*.

- ▶ Universities receive the lowest grades in terms of contributing to students' *spiritual development* and *second or third language skills*. Only 4 students in 10 rate their university as doing a good or excellent job in these regards. Less than half also rate their universities as doing a good or excellent job in terms of developing students' *ability to address issues in personal life* and *mathematical skills*.

Overall satisfaction

While universities do not necessarily receive high ratings in terms of their contribution to personal growth and development issues, students are generally satisfied with their experience at university. In particular, the vast majority of students (92%) report being satisfied with their decision to attend their current university, and almost as many (85%) are satisfied with the quality of education they have received from their university. However, according to students, universities do not perform as well in showing concern for students as individuals (26% are dissatisfied) or making students feel as if they are part of the university (23% disagree that this is the case).

Conclusion

Generally, students at Canadian universities report having a positive experience in university. As such, these results reflect much of what we found in 2005 and 2002, the last two times such surveys were conducted with undergraduate 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.