

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This is the thirteenth cooperative study undertaken by the Canadian Undergraduate 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, or graduating students. This year's study presents the results for students in their first year of university in 2007. The last two surveys of first-year students were conducted in 2004 and 2001.

The 2007 survey involved 34 universities. Traditionally, this has been a paper-based survey, which universities have mailed to students. This was the second year that universities could choose to administer the survey using either a paper-based or an on-line version of the questionnaire. Universities participating in the paper-based survey distributed packages consisting of a cover letter, questionnaire, and a postage-paid, self-addressed return envelope to a sample of about 1,000 first-year students. Those participating in the web-based survey provided PRA Inc. with e-mail addresses for a random sample of up to 1,000 first-year students, an electronic logo for their university, and an electronic signature of a university official. PRA managed the on-line survey, which involved liaising with universities and the company that hosted the on-line survey.

Overall, the response rate was 44% and produced a sample of approximately 12,600 students.

Profile of first-year students

According to our survey, the typical first-year undergraduate student is an 18-year-old female. Indeed, female students outnumber male students by almost two to one. This is similar to past CUSC surveys of first-year students. Although they are more common in our sample, for the most part, the experience and attitudes of female students appears to be similar to those of male students. The average age of first-year students is just over 18 years, and, in fact, 73% of students are 18 years of age or younger. Overall, 18% of students report being part of a visible minority, 3% of students identify themselves as Aboriginal people, and 5% of students self-report as having disabilities.

In their first year of university, about half of students (46%) continue to live with their parents (or some other relative or guardian). As many (47%) are living independently in either on-campus housing (33%) or rented accommodations (14%).

About 2 students in 3 report that at least one of their parents has completed some form of post-secondary education, including 37% of students who report that both parents have completed post-secondary training.

Typically, students graduated from high school or CEGEP in 2006 (or later) and had a full course load both at registration and at the time of the survey. Most of these first-year students report majoring in Arts and Humanities (26%), Social Science (15%), Business (13%), or Biological Science (13%) programs.

If their marks are any indication, many students are finding university more academically challenging than high school or CEGEP. While more than 2 students in 3 report an average grade of A- or higher in high school or CEGEP, less than 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.

Financing education

Most students appear to rely on multiple sources to help finance their university education. On average, students report using 3 of 11 different sources. The most common sources of funding are personal. Family members, mainly parents (69%), are the single most common source of financing, but other personal financing sources, such as savings (53%) and earnings from summer work (50%), are also frequently mentioned. Students also rely on other sources, including university scholarships and bursaries (51%) and government loans or bursaries (31%).

Overall, the average amount received from all sources to help students finance their education is about \$10,000. Among students who use a particular source, the largest average amount is in the form of loans, either from financial institutions (about \$6,600) or from government loans or bursaries (almost \$5,700). Of those with a government loan or bursary, 19% report difficulty fulfilling the course load necessary to keep that loan or bursary.

Parents and other family members are also large contributors to students' education. On average, students receive about \$4,900 from parents and other relatives. Students with a university scholarship, award, or bursary receive, on average, about \$2,600. However, about 3 of these students in 10 say they would have been unable to attend university without such financial assistance.

Work income from a current job also contributes to financing their education. About 4 students in 10 report being currently employed, and another 1 student in 5 is seeking work. Among those who are currently employed, most (81%) work 20 hours a week or less. The average employed student works about 15 hours a week.

Among employed students, about 6 in 10 report that their job (excluding jobs related to co-op requirements) has at least some negative impact on their academic performance. This includes many who say that the negative impact is moderate (16%) or significant/substantial (7%). Not surprisingly, the more hours per week they work, the more likely students are to report that their employment is having at least some negative impact on their academic performance.

While it is not necessarily a major worry for most students, financing their education is of at least some concern to most. Overall, 2 students in 3 are at least somewhat concerned about having sufficient funding to complete their university education, including 1 in 5 who is very concerned.

Given that the average age of first-year students is 18 years, it may be surprising that just over 4 in 10 first-year students have at least one credit card. Among these students, while most pay off their credit card(s) monthly, almost 1 in 10 reports carrying a balance on their cards at the time of the survey.

Motivation for attending and choice of university

We asked students to rate the importance of 10 reasons for deciding to attend university. Almost all students 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 rate five or more reasons as very important. Among these 10 reasons, future employment appears to be the main motivation for students to attend university. About two-thirds of students say that either *preparing for specific job or career* (42%) or *getting a good job* (25%) is the single most important reason for going to university.

We asked students to rate the importance of 24 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* (21%); *wanted to live close to home* (20%); and *quality of academic programs* (16%).

When selecting a university, about 6 students in 10 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, some (12%) 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.

About 1 student in 4 says they received direct contact from their university before they graduated from high school or CEGEP. Students are divided about the importance of different contacts with their university. For about 1 in 4 first-year students, *campus visits and open houses* (25%) were the most important, while for about 1 in 5, the most important contact was the *university's web site* (18%) or *viewbooks, brochures or pamphlets* (17%).

Almost all students (93%) report being at least somewhat satisfied with their university's handling of their application for admission, including 61% who are very satisfied.

Experience prior to class

About half of students report receiving assistance from their university before or while first registering. Among those who received such assistance, 95% report being at least somewhat satisfied, including 50% who are very satisfied.

Students often used multiple methods to register. While almost all students registered on-line (91%), many also registered in person (23%), by mail (17%) or by phone (12%). Regardless of the method, at least 8 students in 10 were satisfied the registration process they experienced. Students are slightly more likely to be very satisfied with in person or on-line registration. Students also report that they were able to register mostly (35%) or completely (54%) in the courses they wanted.

About 2 first-year students in 3 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 providing information about campus life (86%). Fewer were satisfied with their orientation in terms of *helping understand university's academic expectation* (80%) or *building 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 by students, about 9 students in 10 (of those who rated these aspects) report having at least some success with *understanding content and information presented in courses* (including 44% who have had very much success), *meeting academic demands* (38% with very much success), *choosing a program of studies that meet their objectives* (51% with very much success), and *performing adequately in written assignments* (36% with very much success). The majority of students report having the least success in terms of *getting academic advice*, with only 23% reporting very much success.

Most students also report having at least some success in adjusting to personal aspects of university life. Among those who rate their success, at least 8 in 10 report having some or much success in *feeling as if they belong at university* (including 47% who report very much success); *making new friends* (46% reporting very much success); and *organizing my time to complete academic work* (28% reporting very much success). Less than half report having success in *becoming involved in campus activities* (46%, with only 13% reporting very much success).

Most students report having at least some success with practical adjustments, although students had the least success *finding useful information and resources on careers and occupations*. While almost 67% report having at least some success, just 19% say that they have had very much success in this regard.

In terms of facilities and services, the vast majority of students are satisfied. Of the services and facilities tested, students are most satisfied with *library* (94% satisfied) and *computer facilities* (93%), and are at least satisfied with *parking facilities* (61% satisfied) and *food services* (71%).

Most students also appear to have positive experiences with university faculty. About 8 in 10 students or more agree that: *professors are reasonably accessible outside class to help students* (including 26% who strongly agree); *generally [they] are satisfied with the quality of teaching [they] have received* (22% strongly agree); *most of [their] professors encourage students to participate in class discussion* (21% strongly agree); and *professors treat students as individuals, not just numbers* (21% strongly agree).

While many students feel the university environment is impersonal, they are generally satisfied. More than 9 students in 10 agree that they are satisfied with their decision to attend their university, including about 4 students in 10 strongly agree. For most, their experience at their university has *met* (67%) or *exceeded* (17%) their expectations.

Conclusion

Generally, students at Canadian universities report having a positive experience in their first year of university. As such, these results reflect much of what we found in 2004 and 2001, the last two times such surveys were conducted 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.