

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This is the twelfth 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, and graduating students. This year's study presents the results for students graduating in 2006. A survey of graduating students was last conducted in 2003.

The 2006 survey involved 25 universities. Traditionally, this has been a paper-based survey, which universities have mailed to students. This was the first 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 graduating students. Those participating in the web-based survey provided PRA Inc. with e-mail addresses for a random sample of up to 1,000 graduating 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 45% and produced a sample of approximately 10,500 students.

Profile of graduating students

Personal profile

The typical graduating student is a single female, studies in English, and is almost 24 years old. About two-thirds of responding students are female; one-third are male. Although the average age is slightly less than 24, in fact, three-quarters of students are 24 years of age or younger. Just over 8 students in 10 are single, that is, are not married or living common-law. In their last undergraduate year, over half of students are living independently. The remaining 4 students in 10 live with their parents.

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.

Academic profile

Typically, students are majoring in a Social Science, Arts and Humanities, or Business program (although many other disciplines are represented), are studying full-time on a four-year degree, and have an average grade of about a B+.

The average length of the degree programs that students are enrolled in is 3.8 years. However, the typical student has spent additional time at his/her current university, having attended the institution for an average of 4.5 years. Indeed, the typical student reports first starting his/her post-secondary studies – not necessarily at his/her current university – in 2000. This may be

partly explained by the fact that some students are part-time, but also that slightly more than one-fifth of students have interrupted their studies for one or more terms, most commonly for reasons related to employment, financing, or travel.

Academic activities

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

Of the academic activities students participate in, five stand out as contributing very much to students' personal growth and development: faculty knowledge of discipline, faculty enthusiasm for material, classroom instruction, co-op or internship programs and written essays and assignments. In each case, half or more of those who provide a rating indicate that these activities contribute very much to their personal growth and development. For example, of those who rate faculty's knowledge of their discipline, 6 students in 10 indicate that such programs contribute very much to their growth.

Extra-curricular activities

We asked students to rate the impact of 19 extra-curricular activities on their personal growth and development. In general, most students rate most extra-curricular activities as having little impact on their growth and development, with a few exceptions.

Among students who have experience with extra-curricular activities, the activities that have the greatest impact are: international placements or exchanges, interactions with other students, and living on campus. In each case, about half or more of those who provide a rating indicate that the activity contributed very much to their personal growth and development. For example, of those who participate in international placements or exchanges (9% of all students), over 7 in 10 report that such placements contributed very much to their growth.

However, two of these activities are experienced by a small subset of students. The activities that have the greatest impact on the most students are: interactions with other students, exposure to students from different cultures, and participating in on-campus student recreational and sports programs. Among these extra-curricular items, the one that appears to have the greatest impact on the most students is interaction with other students. Almost 6 in 10 report that such interactions contributed very much to their growth. As such, students are more likely to credit these interactions than any other academic or extra-curricular activities with contributing very much to their growth.

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 the services tested. The services with the highest proportion of students who indicate that they are very satisfied are: services for students with disabilities, campus medical services, library facilities, and co-op programs. In each case, among those students with experience using the service, one-third or more report that they are very satisfied with it.

Skill growth and development

We asked students to grade their universities in terms of contributing to their growth and development of 33 specific skills.

On average, universities receive their highest marks from students for contributing to students' growth and development in: working independently, broad knowledge of their major field of study, and thinking logically and analytically. 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: ability to access information, written communication skills, accepting people from different cultures, skills for planning and completing projects, ability to understand abstract reasoning, commitment to lifelong learning, and cooperative interaction in groups. 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.

Students rate their universities particularly poorly in terms of their institutions' contribution to growth and development in these areas: mathematical skills, appreciation of the arts, second or third language skills, entrepreneurial skills, and spiritual development. In each case, less than half rate their university as doing a good or excellent job. In the case of entrepreneurial and spiritual skills, less than one-third rate their university as doing at least a good job. In each of these skill areas, students' assessment of their university's contribution varies by discipline.

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, the vast majority of students agree that their professors seem knowledgeable in their fields, communicate well in their teaching, and are reasonably accessible outside of class. 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 education they received from their university (89%) and agree that their learning experience at university was intellectually stimulating (90%). According to students, the weakness of 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 3 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 (83%) also report that they are satisfied with the opportunity to develop lasting friendships.

Feelings of inclusion at a university, on campus, and among one's peers can influence students' overall satisfaction with their university experience. As mentioned, most students are satisfied with the opportunity university provides for developing friendships. However, many students (47%) are dissatisfied with the concern shown by their university for them as individuals, and most (59%) report that they sometimes feel they get the run-around from their university. While most (71%) feel that they are part of their university, a considerable number (28%) are dissatisfied.

In spite of this, the vast majority of students generally report being satisfied (89%) with the overall quality of education they received at their university, and almost as many (82%) say their university has met or exceeded their expectations. Indeed, most say they are satisfied (89%) with their decision to attend their university. These positive impressions are further reflected in the fact that 86% of students would recommend their university to others.

Education financing and debt

Over half of 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 \$13,800. Among those reporting debt, the average amount per student is just over \$24,000. The most common source of debt is student loans, as almost 4 students in 10 report such debt. As well, student loans also account for 58% 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 most of the rest of students' debt.

Thinking about their last year of studies, we asked students to indicate which of 11 sources they are using to help pay for their university education. The most commonly used sources of funding are parents or other family members (56%), although at least one-third of students report relying on personal savings, earnings from summer or current employment, or government loans or bursaries. On average, students' reported sources contribute just over \$12,100.

Credit cards can be another source of debt, as over 8 students in 10 report having at least one credit card. Almost 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, their current balance owing is an average is \$670. Among those with a credit card balance, the average balance owing is over 4 times higher at approximately \$2,800.

About 6 students in 10 are currently employed. Students who are employed spend an average of 19 hours a week working. Most of those who work (65%) report at least some negative impact from their employment on their academic performance. About 1 in 10 reports that this negative impact is significant or substantial.

Future education and employment

As mentioned earlier, many students are dissatisfied with faculty in terms of their knowledge of career opportunities. Similarly, many students report that their university as a whole is not as knowledgeable as it could be about career opportunities. While close to 6 students in 10 are satisfied with their university's knowledge of career options in their area of study, the remaining 4 in 10 are dissatisfied.

Most students are prepared for employment, as demonstrated by the fact that some 8 students in 10 have current curriculum vitae. 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 almost half of students intend to continue their education in the first year after graduating. In the coming year, many also intend to simply take time off (20%) or travel for an extended period (38%). About 1 student in 4 will be involved in unpaid volunteer work in that first year.

Among the half who have no immediate educational plans, almost 9 students in 10 report that they will or may take additional university studies in the future. Overall, less than 1 student in 10 is not planning to or would not consider taking additional university education.

About 1 graduating student in 3 has arranged for full or part-time employment other than a summer job, including about 1 in 5 who has 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 2 in 3 report that these jobs are permanent. Among these students who have arranged full or part-time employment, half report that a degree in their area of study was required. About 6 students in 10 report that their degree helped them get their job and that their job was related to the knowledge and skills acquired from study at university. University training appears to be more relevant to those who have arranged full-time, rather than part-time, jobs.

Among those with arranged jobs, just over 8 students in 10 are satisfied with them, including 1 in 3 who is very satisfied with his/her job. On average, students with arranged jobs anticipate earning almost \$33,000 annually, although the amount is considerably lower for those with part-time (\$20,400) than full-time employment (\$37,700).

Among all students, a majority believes that there are at least some jobs in Canada in their major area of study. However, about 1 student in 4 feels that there are many such jobs, and about the same think that few or very few jobs are available.

Conclusion

Generally, graduating students are satisfied with their university and have had generally positive experiences while attending. As noted, the vast majority would recommend their university to others, suggesting that students typically believe that the years they spent working toward their degree were worthwhile.