

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Methodology

This is the eleventh cooperative study undertaken by the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium (CUSC). The surveys target various undergraduate groups; five of the surveys, including this year's, have focused on a sample of all undergraduates, while others have targeted specific types of students.

Twenty-eight universities across Canada participated in the 2005 survey. Traditionally, this has been a paper-based survey, which is mailed to students. This year, as part of a pilot project, six universities participated in an on-line version of the survey. 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 undergraduate students. Those participating in the pilot study provided PRA Inc. with e-mail addresses for a random sample of 1,000 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. The overall response rate was about 46% and produced a sample of almost 12,800 students.

Profile of respondents

Personal profile

The typical student who responded is female, 22 years of age, and single. In fact, about 64% of the respondents are female, 62% are younger than 22 years of age, and 89% are technically single, although many (28%) are in a long-term relationship. Most students live independently (57%), most often in rented accommodations, but also in an on-campus residence or a personally owned home. The remaining students live with their parents. Some 15% of students self-identify as a visible minority, 3% report being Aboriginal, and 6% report having a disability.

Academic profile

The typical undergraduate student is attending university full-time, has been in post-secondary education for almost three years, and is planning to complete a degree at his or her current university. Most commonly, students plan to complete their post-secondary education with a Bachelor's (33%) or Master's (31%) degree, although about 14% plan to obtain a Ph.D. Most students report that their current average grade is between a B and B+, although this average tends to rise as students progress in their studies.

Time availability

On average, students spend 15 hours per week attending class and labs, and another 17 hours per week on academic study outside of class. Students typically complete an average of 11 papers, reports, or assignments during the academic year.

Most students report being satisfied with the amount of time they have for study outside of classes and labs, but this appears to come at the expense of time devoted to family, work, and leisure. Almost all students (89%) report having at least some time available each week for study outside of class and labs, and most are satisfied (71%) with the amount of time they have available for this activity. Fewer students (64%) report having at least some time available for weekly family responsibilities, and while most are satisfied (63%), many are not. Fewer still (58%) say they have at least some time available for work each week, although most (63%) are satisfied with this time availability. Similarly, while most (58%) say that each week, they have at least some time available for leisure activities, fewer (53%) are satisfied with the amount of time they have available to devote to this activity.

Type of academic instruction

The majority of students report that most of their instruction is classroom based, although many also report that they have at least one such class with on-line supports. Indeed, among undergraduates, in-class instruction with on-line supports is the most common (with 77% reporting at least one class taught this way). Most students (73%) also report taking courses that use strictly classroom-based instruction. Other methods of instruction are less common: a mix of classroom and on-line instruction (21%) or strictly on-line instruction (10%).

Regardless of the type of teaching method, a majority of students report being satisfied with that type of instruction. However, in-class instruction with on-line supports remains the most favoured approach. Almost all students (93%) who have experience with in class instruction with on-line supports are satisfied with this teaching method. In fact, some 66% of students say that this is the preferred method of instruction. The majority of those (82%) who have taken courses with a mix of in-class and on-line instruction are satisfied with this approach, and another 12% of students overall say it is their preferred type of instruction. Many students (79%) who have taken strictly classroom-based courses are satisfied with this approach. About 18% of all students say this is their preferred method of instruction. Few prefer methods that rely strictly on on-line instruction.

Work and financing education

Current and future employment

Just over half (53%) of undergraduate students are currently employed, most commonly working off campus (44%). The remaining students (46%) are not employed, including 32% who are not seeking employment. Students who are employed work an average of 18 hours per week. Some

64% of those who are working say that their employment has at least some negative impact on their academic performance.

Part-time students (76%) are more likely to be employed than full-time students (50%). A typical part-time student who is employed spends an average of 31 hours per week at a job. This compares to 16 hours per week for full-time students who are employed.

Most undergraduate students have made some decisions about a career path. A slim majority (56%) report that they have decided on a career path, while some others (28%) report that they may have decided. Regardless, most students (69%) have a current curriculum vitae or resume, which suggests that they are ready to seek employment.

While some students (26%) are optimistic about their job prospects, saying that many jobs are available in their career field, others (20%) believe there are few such jobs. Many students (41%) believe there will be some jobs in their field. As students near graduation, their perception of the job market becomes less favourable. Only 23% of fourth-year students believe there are many jobs in their career field compared to 30% of first-year students.

Current debt

About half of all undergraduate students (51%) report having at least some debt resulting from their university education. The most common source of debt is student loans, which 33% of all students report using. Other common sources of debt are loans from parents or family (18%) and loans from financial institutions (16%). On average, students with debt report owing more than \$16,000. Typically, as students progress in their studies, their debt load increases.

Financing education

Students tend to use multiple sources to fund their current year of university. The most common source, used by more than half of the respondents (56%), is parents or family. Other common sources include earnings from summer work (42%), personal savings (38%), earnings from current employment (31%), and government loans or bursaries (30%). On average, students report receiving almost \$11,300 from these and other sources.

Since most students depend on multiple sources of funding, perhaps it is not surprising that 71% 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 post-secondary education.

Credit cards appear to be a common source of managing cash flow as about 70% 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 73% of students with credit cards say that they pay off their balance each month. However, the average outstanding balance for those who do not pay off their credit card each month is almost \$2,500.

Perceptions of university

In general, students tend to have a positive impression of most aspects of their university. However, about half (48%) believe that sometimes, their university gives them the run around.

The vast majority of students also have positive impressions of their universities in terms of treating students fairly, independently of race or gender (over 90% in both cases). They also feel that they have had an intellectually stimulating experience at their university (86%).

Services prior to class

Most students are satisfied with the services they received prior to class. About 76% of students report being satisfied with the process of registering for courses, including 29% who are very satisfied. Slightly fewer, but still a majority of students (63%), are satisfied with the availability of courses required for their program, including 16% who are very satisfied. Students' satisfaction with course availability decreases as they progress through university. While 74% of those in first-year are satisfied with the availability of courses, this decreases to less than 60% of students in third and fourth year.

Services and facilities

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 (88%), libraries (82%), instructional facilities (80%), and the general condition of buildings and grounds (78%). Fewer students, although still a majority, are satisfied with the available study space (68%).

A majority of students are also satisfied with most other university facilities and special services offered such as computer facilities, campus medical services, and university-based social activities. They are not satisfied with practical services such as parking and food services. In fact, only 39% of students who have used the parking facilities are satisfied with them.

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, career counselling, and academic advising. Students attending Group 1 universities are more likely to be satisfied with special services than those attending Group 2 and Group 3 universities.

Perception of faculty

Regardless of the type of university, students tend to report positive experiences with faculty. However, in several areas, students attending Group 1 universities are more likely than those attending Group 2 and Group 3 institutions to agree.

More than 80% of students report that professors encourage student participation in class, are available outside of class to help students, and show sensitivity to racial issues. About 75% agree that professors are sensitive to gender issues, generally look out for students' interests, and treat students as individuals, not just numbers.

This generally positive perception of professors is reflected in the fact that 83% of students agree that they are satisfied with the quality of teaching they have experienced at their university, including 16% who strongly agree. That said, about 16% disagree.

University experience

Campus activities

Generally, students' involvement in on-campus, non-academic activities appears to be limited. Although many students report attending events occasionally, few are often involved in any one activity. That said, the most common activities, often attended by less than one-fifth of students, are campus lectures and campus social events.

Personal growth and development

We asked students to rate their university's contributions to their personal growth and development in 24 different areas. On average, these universities receive a rating between a "C" and a "B" 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. About three-quarters of students rate their university's contribution as good or excellent in this regard. Universities also receive higher-than-average grades for their contribution to students' development of thinking logically and analytically and cooperative group interaction. In both cases, about 6 students in 10 or more rate their universities as good or excellent.

Universities receive the lowest scores in terms of contributing to students' spiritual development. Only one-quarter of students rate their university as doing a good or excellent job in this regard. Other aspects receiving low scores include: appreciation of the arts; preparation for employment; and mathematical skills.

Areas requiring improvement

Twice we asked students to rank from separate lists the three areas requiring the greatest improvement at their university. Opinions are diverse, and no single facility or service was named by a majority of respondents. Among some 30 facilities and services tested, both academic and practical concerns top the list. The two most commonly cited areas that require improvement are emphasis on teaching excellence (41%) and parking facilities/student parking (40%). These are closely followed by: food services (37%) and university spending on financial

aid (35%). Students also indicate that other areas relating to the balance between academics and social life (28%) and a sense of community among students (28%) are in need of improvement.

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 (89%) report being satisfied with their decision to attend their current university, and almost as many (86%) 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 or making students feel as if they are part of the university. About 3 students in 10 are dissatisfied with their institutions in these areas.

Conclusion

There is remarkable consistency among students' responses across time. As in past years, undergraduate students are generally satisfied, if not very satisfied, with their university experience. Almost all students report being satisfied with two key facets, that is, with the overall quality of education they are receiving and with their choice of university.

However, students can identify areas that require improvement. Indeed, when students are asked to name the three top areas needing improvement at their university, four issues stand out: emphasis on teaching excellence; university spending on financial aid; balance between academic and social life; and sense of community among students.