

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This is the tenth cooperative study undertaken by the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium (CUSC). The surveys have targeted various undergraduate sub-samples; four of the surveys have focused on a sample of all undergraduates, while the others have targeted specific types of students: either graduates or first-year students. This year's study presents the results for students who were attending their first year of undergraduate studies in 2004.

This year, 27 universities participated in the study. Most participating universities distributed 1,000 surveys to their first-year students. To ensure a high response rate, several reminders were mailed to students who had been chosen to participate. Overall, the response rate was almost 48%, and over 11,000 students participated. Compared with three years ago, when this survey was last conducted, little has changed in terms of results. First-year students in 2001 and 2004 are very similar, both in terms of their personal and academic characteristics, and in their attitudes toward their university experience.

Profile of first-year students

According to our survey, the typical first-year undergraduate student is a 20-year-old female. Indeed, female students outnumber male students by a factor of 2:1. This is similar to past surveys: two-thirds of the students are women and one-third are men. 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. While the average age of first-year students is almost 20 years, 84% of students are 19 years of age or younger. Overall, 15% of students report being a visible minority, and 2% of students identify themselves as Aboriginal people. About 5% of students self-report as disabled.

In their first year of university, a majority of students (55%) continue to live with their parents (or some other relative or guardian). About 43% are living independently, most commonly in on-campus housing (26%) or in rented accommodations (16%).

About two-thirds report that at least one of their parents has completed some form of post-secondary education, including 40% of students who report that both parents have completed post-secondary training.

Typically, students graduated from high school or CEGEP in 2003 (or later) and had a full course load both at registration and at the time of the survey. Most of these first-year students (65%) report majoring in Arts and Humanities, Social Science, Business, or Biological Science programs.

If their marks are any indication, many students are finding university more academically challenging than high school or CEGEP. While almost two-thirds of students report an average grade of A- or higher in high school or CEGEP, less than one-third expect such an average at the end of their first year of university. Typically, students expect a B/B+ average 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 three of 11 different sources. The most common sources of funding are personal. Family, mainly parents (64%), is the single most common financing source, but other personal financing sources, such as savings (40%) and earnings from summer work (37%), are also frequently mentioned. Other sources that students often use are university scholarships or financial awards (40%) and government loans or bursaries (30%).

Overall, the average amount received from all sources to help students finance their education is about \$8,000. Among students who use a particular source, the largest average amount is in the form of government loans or bursaries (\$5,300). Of those with a government loan or bursary, about 15% report having difficulty fulfilling the course load necessary to keep that loan or bursary. Parents and other family are also large contributors to students' education. On average, students receive about \$4,700 from parents and other relatives. Among those who received a university scholarship or financial award, the average amount from these sources is about \$2,100. Of those who report receiving a university scholarship or financial award, almost one-quarter report that they would be unable to attend university without such financial assistance.

While it is not necessarily a major worry for most students, education financing is of at least some concern to most. Overall, three-quarters of students are at least somewhat concerned about having sufficient funding to complete their university education, including over one-quarter who are very concerned.

Work income from a current job also contributes to education financing. Just over 4 students in 10 report being currently employed, and another 1 student in 5 is seeking work. Among those who are currently employed, about 8 students in 10 work 20 hours a week or less. The average employed student works about 16 hours a week.

Among employed students, about half report that their job (other than that 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 (10%) or significant/substantial (6%). 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.

Motivation for attending and choice of university

Decision to attend university

We asked students to rate the importance of nine reasons in their decision to attend university. Almost all students report that at least one of these reasons was very important to their decision to attend university. Indeed, multiple reasons often play a role. For example, half of the students rate five or more reasons as very important.

Just over 8 students in 10 rate *getting a good job* as very important in their decision to attend university. Other reasons cited as very important by two-thirds or more of students are: *preparing for a specific job or career*, *pursuit of knowledge*, *getting a good general education*, and *increasing their knowledge in an academic field*.

Future employment appears to be the main motivation for students to attend university. Almost two-thirds of students choose either *preparing for specific job or career* (35%) or *getting a good job* (29%) as the single most important reason for going to university.

Choice of university

We asked students to rate the importance of 26 different reasons in their decision to attend their current university. The reasons most often thought to be very important include: *quality of academic programs* at their current university (57%); *specific career-related program* (54%); *the university has a good reputation* (48%); and *wanting to live close to home* (37%).

While many reasons are very important to students, when asked to choose one reason as the most important, students identify three key reasons: *specific career-related programs* (21%); *quality of academic programs* (18%); and *wanted to live close to home* (14%).

When selecting a university, almost 7 students in 10 report applying to more than one university. Among students who applied to more than one university, the average number was almost four. Not only did students often apply to more than one university, many (18%) also applied to a college. Overall, the vast majority of students (78%) report that they are attending their first choice of university.

In considering which university to attend, 8 students in 10 or more report reviewing brochures and pamphlets, visiting the university web site, visiting the campus, and/or having a university representative visit their high school or CEGEP. The most important contacts in their decision to attend their current university are these same sources: *campus visits* (25%), *university web site* (16%), *brochures or pamphlets* (15%), and *visit by a university representative* (13%).

Almost all students (90%) report being at least somewhat satisfied with their university's handling of their application for admission, including 56% who are very satisfied.

Experience prior to class

About 4 students in 10 report receiving assistance from their university before or while first registering. Among those who experienced such assistance, almost 9 in 10 (86%) report being at least somewhat satisfied, including almost 4 in 10 (37%) who are very satisfied.

The most common method of registering is on-line (64%), followed by mail (26%). In person (16%) and by phone (7%) are less common methods. Most students (85%) report being at least somewhat satisfied with the registration process, including 42% who are very satisfied. Students are slightly more likely to be satisfied with registration by mail or on-line than in person or by phone. Students report that they were able to register mostly (29%) or completely (53%) in the courses they wanted.

Most first-year students participated in a university orientation program (61%), and a majority of these students report that they had a positive experience. Indeed, the vast majority of students — 7 students in 10 or more — who attended orientation report being somewhat satisfied with it in terms of its making them *feel welcome, providing information about campus life and student*

services, helping them understand the university's academic expectations, helping in their personal and social transition to university, and building their confidence.

University experience

We asked students to rate their success with a wide variety of personal, academic, and practical adjustments to university. Of the eight academic adjustments rated by students, about 9 students in 10 (who rated these aspects) report having at least some success with *understanding content and information presented in courses* (including 43% who have had very much success), *meeting academic demands* (36%), *meeting computer literacy requirements* (58%), *choosing a program of studies that meet their objectives* (49%), and *performing adequately in written assignments* (34%). Students report the least success in terms of *getting academic advice*. While a majority reports at least some success, only 18% report very much success.

Most students (60%) also report at least some success in adjusting to personal aspects of university life. Among those who rate their success, at least 8 in 10 report some or much success in *adjusting to living here* (including 52% who report very much success); *feeling as if they belong at university* (45%); *making new friends* (44%); and *organizing my time to complete academic work* (28%). Less than half report success in *becoming involved in campus activities* (36%, including 9% who report very much success).

Most students report at least some success with practical adjustments. Some 3 students in 4 or more who provided a rating, report that they have had at least some success in: *finding their way around campus* (including 74% who report very much success), *using the library* (39%), and *finding suitable, affordable housing* (34%). Students have had the least success *finding useful information and resources on careers and occupations*. While almost 6 students in 10 (58%) report having at least some success, few say that they have had very much success (14%).

Satisfaction with aspects of university experience

Generally, students are satisfied with various aspects of their university, and most report that their expectations were met or exceeded.

We asked students to rate their satisfaction with 21 university facilities and services. Of those who report using various facilities and services, 8 students in 10 are at least satisfied with almost all. For example, about 9 students in 10 are satisfied or very satisfied with the *library facilities*, *access to computers*, *instructional facilities*, and *average class sizes*. Of the services and facilities tested, students are least satisfied with *parking facilities*. Indeed, less than half are satisfied, and only 11% are very satisfied, with parking.

Most students also appear to have positive experiences with university faculty. Some 7 or more students in 10 agree that: *professors are reasonably accessible outside class to help students* (including 25% who strongly agree); *generally they are satisfied with the quality of teaching they have received* (21%); *most of their professors encourage students to participate in class discussion* (19%); and *professors treat students as individuals, not just numbers* (19%).

While many students feel the university environment is impersonal, they are generally satisfied. About 9 students in 10 agree that they are satisfied with their decision to attend their university. Indeed, about 4 students in 10 strongly agree. For most, their experience at their university has met their expectations (64%). While for some (18%), their experience has fallen short, for almost as many (17%), their experience has exceeded their expectations.

Conclusion

Generally, students at Canadian universities report having a positive experience in their first year of university. As such, these results confirm much of what we found in 2001, the last time such a survey was conducted with first-year university students. While there are areas that might be improved, most students report being satisfied with both their choice of university and their university's fulfilling their expectations.