

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This is the ninth 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. This year's study presents the results for undergraduate students who were graduating in the spring of 2003.

The 2003 survey involved 26 universities, each of which distributed up to 1,000 surveys to its graduating students. To ensure a high response rate, several reminders were mailed to students who had been chosen to participate. Overall, the response rate was 49%; thus, approximately 11,200 students participated in this year's study. A survey of graduating students was last conducted in 2000. Little has changed in terms of both the profile of students graduating or students' attitudes toward their university experience.

Profile of graduating students

Personal profile

The typical graduating student is a single female who is almost 25 years old. About two-thirds of responding students are female; one-third are male. Although the average age is 25, three-quarters of students are 24 years of age or younger. About 8 students in 10 are single, that is, have never been married. The remaining students are or have been in a long-term relationship, having been married, divorced, or widowed. Less than 1 student in 10 reports having children. Almost 1 student in 5 (17%) self-identifies as a visible minority, and about 2% identify themselves as First Nation(s), Métis, Inuit, or non-status Aboriginal peoples

In their last undergraduate year, 6 students in 10 are living independently. The remaining 4 students in 10 live with their parents. Most students living independently live in a rented space (46%), that is, an apartment, a room or a house, although a few live in a home they personally own (8%) or on campus (4%).

Academic profile

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

The average length of the degree programs in which these students are enrolled is 3.8 years. However, the typical student will have taken an additional half year to complete it (4.4 years in total). This is partly explained by the fact the some students are part-time, but also by the fact that almost one-fifth of students have interrupted their studies for one or more terms, most commonly for reasons of employment, financing, or travel.

One-third of students report transferring credits from another university or college to their current program. About 1 student in 10 (9%) reports being in a co-op program, although this

varies dramatically by discipline. About 30% of students in an Engineering program report that they are in co-op programs, while only 2% of students in Arts and Humanities programs report the same.

Contribution to personal growth and development

Academic activities

We asked students to assess the contribution of 16 academic activities 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: *co-op or internship programs*, *faculty knowledge of discipline*, *classroom instruction*, *faculty enthusiasm for material*, and *undergraduate thesis or self-study*. 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 co-op or internship programs, 7 students in 10 indicate that such programs contribute very much to their growth.

However, some of these activities are experienced by a small subset of students. If we consider those having the largest impact on the most students, then the top five are: *faculty knowledge of discipline*, *classroom instruction*, *faculty enthusiasm for subject material*, *faculty feedback*, and *assigned reading*. Only the first two contribute very much to the personal growth and development of over half of the students.

Extra-curricular activities

We asked students to rate the impact of 18 extra-curricular activities on their personal growth and development. In general, students rate most extra-curricular activities as having very little impact on their growth and development.

There are 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*, *living on campus*, *off-campus community service or volunteer activity*, and *servicing as a peer advisor*. In each case, about half or more of those who provide a rating indicate that the activity contributes very much to their personal growth and development. For example, of those who participate in international placements or exchanges (8% of all students), over 7 in 10 report that such placements contribute very much to their growth.

However, some 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*, *campus social events*, and *exposure to students from different cultures*. Among these extra-curricular items, the one that appears to have the greatest impact on the most students is interaction with other students. About 6 in 10 report that such interactions contribute very much to their growth. As such, students are more likely to credit such interactions than any other academic or extra-curricular activities with contributing very much to their growth.

Skill growth and development

We asked students to grade their universities in terms of contributing to their growth and development of 28 specific skills.

On average, universities receive their highest marks from students for contributing to students' growth and development in the following areas: *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 their growth and development in the following areas: *ability to access information*, *accepting people from different cultures*, *skills for planning and completing projects*, *written communication skills*, *identifying and solving problems*, and *cooperative interaction in groups*. In each case above, 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*, *dealing with personal crises*, and *entrepreneurial skills*. In each case, fewer than half rate their university as doing a good or excellent job. In the case of entrepreneurial skills, only about one-quarter rate their university as doing at least a good job.

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 not only do their professors seem *knowledgeable in their field*, but their professors also *communicate well in their teaching* and *encourage participation in class discussions*. Most 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 (86%) and agree that their learning experience at university was intellectually stimulating (87%).

According to students, the weaknesses of some of their professors are that they do not *provide useful feedback* and they are not *knowledgeable of career opportunities* in their field. In both cases, while a majority agrees with these statements, about 3 students in 10 disagree.

As we saw earlier, most students believe that interaction with other students has contributed very much to their personal growth and development. Thus, the fact that the vast majority (83%) report that they are satisfied with the opportunity to develop lasting friendships is important.

Feelings of inclusion at a university, on campus, and among one's peers can influence students' overall satisfaction with their university experience. As we saw above, most students are satisfied with the opportunity university provides for developing friendships. Many students (42%) are dissatisfied with the concern shown by their university for them as individuals, and most (61%) report that they sometimes feel they get the run-around from their university. While most (69%) feel that they are part of their university, a significant number (29%) are dissatisfied.

In spite of this, students generally report being satisfied (89%) with the overall quality of education they received at their university. They also report being satisfied (87%) with their decision to attend their university. This positive impression is further reflected in the fact that 85% of students would recommend their university to others.

Education financing and debt

Almost 6 students in 10 report having some debt from financing their education. Overall, the average amount of debt per student is just over \$11,500. Among those reporting debt, the average amount per student is just over \$20,000. The most common source of debt is student loans, with 4 students in 10 reporting such debt. Thus, it is not surprising that among those with debt, student loans account for 65% of all moneys owing.

Credit cards can be another source of debt. About 4 students in 5 report having at least one credit card. On average, the balance on their credit cards is about \$1,300. Almost three-quarters of those who have credit cards report regularly paying off their balance each month. Among those who regularly pay off their balance, their current balance on average is \$690. Among those who do not, the current average balance owing is over four times higher: \$2,900.

We asked students to think about the academic year and indicate which of 13 sources they are using to help pay for their university education. The most commonly used sources of funding are parents or other family (49%). Also common, each used by at least one-third of students, are earnings from summer work, academic scholarships, earnings from current employment, personal savings, and government loans or bursaries. Overall, students report all sources contributing an average of almost \$10,900.

About 6 students in 10 are currently employed. Among those employed, students spend an average of almost 19 hours a week on the job. Most of those who work (59%) report at least some negative impact from their employment on their academic performance. Some 10% report 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 two-thirds of students are satisfied with their university's knowledge of career options in their area of study, one-third 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 have decided on a specific career field. For many, this decision does not yet have to be made, since about 4 students in 10 intend to continue their education in the first year after graduating. In the coming year, many intend to simply take time off (19%) or travel for an extended period (38%). About 1 student in 3 will be involved in unpaid volunteer work in that first year.

Among the half who have no immediate educational plans, 9 students in 10 report that they will or may take additional university studies in the future. In fact, only 7% of all students are not planning to or would not consider taking additional university education.

About one-third of graduating students have arranged for full or part-time employment other than a summer job, including about one-fifth who have arranged a full-time job. Half of all students were seeking work at the time of the survey.

Of those with full-time jobs, about 6 in 10 report that these jobs are permanent. This represents about 13% of all students. University education has some relevance to those who have arranged employment. About half report that a degree in their area of study was required, while almost 6 students in 10 report both 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 jobs.

Among all students, a majority believes that there are at least some jobs in Canada in their major area of study. However, only about 1 student in 4 feels that there are many such jobs, and almost 3 students in 10 believe that there are few.

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, typically, students believe that the four years they spent working on their undergraduate education was worthwhile.