

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Methodology

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

This year, 30 universities across Canada participated in the study. Each participating university distributed a survey package consisting of a cover letter, questionnaire, and a postage-paid, self-addressed return envelope to a sample of about 1,000 undergraduate students. The overall response rate was about 42%, typical of a survey of this type, and produced a sample of 12,700.

Profile of undergraduate students

Personal profile

The typical undergraduate student is female and 23 years old, although almost half of the students are 20 years old or younger. Most students (60%) are living independently, either in a rented space, a home they own or in residence on campus. The remaining 40% live at home with their parents or other relatives. Students are likely to be in some type of relationship, either 'seeing someone' or in a long-term relationship. About 14% of undergraduate students self-identify as visible minority, while 3% report being Aboriginal. Some 5% of students report having a disability.

Academic profile

Typically, undergraduate students are going to university full-time (88%) and are majoring in Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, or Business, with plans to complete their degree at the university they currently attend (87%). Most plan to finish their post-secondary education with a Master's, PhD, or some other degree than a single Bachelor's. The typical student reports ending this academic year with a grade point average of B/B+, however, the average grade tends to rise as undergraduates advance through their programs.

Undergraduate students spend an average of 16 hours a week in class or labs, and another 17 hours a week on academic work outside of class. They complete, on average, 11 papers, reports or assignments in the academic year.

Computer use

Almost all students have access to a computer at their current residence (93%) and generally report that it is very adequate (74%) for their academic work. Almost all students have access to the Internet (95%), most commonly from home or on campus. Typically, students spend 17 hours a week on computer doing academic work and other activities.

Work and funding their education

Current and future employment

About half of these undergraduates report having a job either on campus, or more commonly, off campus. About one-third report that they are not employed and are not looking for work, while over one-tenth of students do not currently have a job, but are looking. Employed students spend an average of 18 hours a week at work, and most report that their jobs have at least some negative impact on their academic performance.

While 80% of part-time students are employed, only about half (49%) of full-time students have jobs. Typical part-time students devote far more hours per week (34 on average) to their jobs than do full-time students (17 on average).

While not all students are currently employed, 6 students in 10 report they have decided on a career field or specific occupation. Another 3 students in 10 think they may have decided. The further along students are in their programs, the more likely they are to have decided on a career field or occupation. While two-thirds of those in the fourth year of their programs have decided, about half of first-year students believe they have already decided on a career field or occupation.

Almost three-quarters of students report having an up-to-date resume, suggesting that they are prepared for employment opportunities. That said, only 4 students in 10 believe that there are many job opportunities in their chosen field. About half believe there are only some, few or very few jobs. Students become more pessimistic about the availability of jobs in their chosen field as they get near graduation.

Current debt

About half of all undergraduate students report having some debt resulting from financing their university education. The most common form of debt is student loans -- reported by one-third of all respondents -- but money owed to parents, relatives or financial institutions is also common. Students, with debt, report owing \$13,200 on average. However, this average is among all undergraduate students; those further along in their programs typically owe more.

Financing of education

Most students depend on multiple sources to fund their university education. The most commonly cited source by over half the students is their parents. About 4 students in 10 use earnings from summer employment and personal savings. One-third rely on scholarships from their university, government loans or bursaries, and earnings from current employment. The typical student estimates that these sources have financed \$9,000 of their current year at university.

Since most students depend on multiple sources of funding, perhaps it is not surprising that 7 students in 10 have concerns 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 are a common method of managing cash flow, but they also are another source of debt for some. Two-thirds of students have at least one credit card. The average balance on their credit cards is just over \$1,000. About 7 in 10 report regularly paying off their credit card balance each month. However, one-fifth of students with credit cards report they do not.

Perceptions of university

In general, students tend to have a positive impression of most aspects of their university. Although, about half 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, independent of race or gender (over 90% in both cases). They feel they have had an intellectually stimulating experience at their university (86%). Fewer, but still a majority (70%), feel they are a part of their university.

Services prior to classes

We tested a couple of services that take place prior to class. About half of these students remember taking part in an orientation or other transition program. Of those who participated, about 4 students in 5 were satisfied with their experience, leaving about 1 in 5 who were dissatisfied with the orientation. All students experience course registration, and three-quarters report they are satisfied with this process. Almost one-quarter of students are dissatisfied with the registration process.

Services and facilities

Most students report being satisfied -- although not very satisfied -- with various key educational services and facilities at their institutions. A majority report being satisfied with academic facilities such as class size (86%), library (80%), and the conditions of the buildings and grounds in general (78%). Among these types of facilities, students are least satisfied with study space; however, 70% report being satisfied. Student satisfaction varies by type of university. For example, students attending Group 3 universities are the most satisfied with their library facilities, and those in Group 1 the least. Conversely, students attending Group 1 universities tend to be more satisfied with class size than those at larger Group 3 institutions.

A majority of students also report being satisfied with most other on campus facilities and services, such as social events, bookstores, medical services and computer facilities. They are not as satisfied with very practical services such as on campus food and parking. In fact, only about one-third of students who use 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.

Perception of faculty

Generally, students think highly of their professors. However, those attending Group 1 universities are more likely to have a positive impression of their professors than their counterparts in Group 2 or 3 universities.

Most report professors are available outside of class to help students, encourage student participation in class, and treat students as individuals, not numbers. In fact, 3 out of 4 report that professors generally look out for students' interest. In addition, some 6 in 10 students indicate that some professors have taken a personal interest in their academic progress. That said, more than one-fifth of students disagree with these assessments.

This generally positive perception of professors is reflected in the fact that 8 students in 10 report being satisfied with the quality of teaching they have experienced at their university. However, almost 1 student in 5 is dissatisfied.

Greatest improvements needed

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 34 facilities and services tested, very practical concerns top the list. The most commonly cited area that requires improvement is parking facilities/student parking (41%), followed closely by food services (34%).

Other, more academic, issues are also seen as needing improvement. About 3 students in 10 cite such things as improving the emphasis on teaching excellence, computer facilities, and campus bookstore. About 1 in 4 cites the need to improve the size of undergraduate classes (to make them smaller) and university's spending on financial aid. About 1 in 5 cites academic advising and technology in the classroom as in need of the greatest improvement. Another one-fifth of students suggest priority should be given to improving the sense of community among students.

University experience: Personal growth and development

Generally, students' involvement on campus in non-academic activities appears to be limited. Although many students report attending events occasionally, few are often involved in any one activity. Two-thirds of students report at least occasionally going to campus social events, making it the most common event attended.

We asked students to rate their university's contributions to their personal growth and development in 22 different areas. On average, these universities receive a rating of between a 'C' and a 'B' on most items tested suggesting they were 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. Some 3 students in 4 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, 6 students in 10 rate their universities as good or excellent.

Universities receive the lowest scores in terms of contributing to students' preparation for employment. Just less than 4 students in 10 rate their university as doing a good or excellent job in this regard.

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, some 9 students in 10 report being satisfied with their decision to attend their current university, and almost as many are satisfied with the quality of education they have received from this university. However, according to students, universities do not perform as well in showing concern for students as individuals. One-third of students are dissatisfied with their institutions in this regard.

Conclusion

As in past years, undergraduate students generally appear to be satisfied, if not very satisfied, with their university experience. While parking and food services top students' lists, such areas as computer facilities, campus bookstores, teaching excellence, and academic advising are also cited by many students as priority areas for improvement. That said, it is important to remember that nearly all students report being satisfied with the overall quality of education they are receiving.