

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Methodology**

This is the seventh co-operative 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 first-year students.

In 2001, 26 universities across Canada participated in the study. Each participating university distributed a survey package consisting of a cover letter, questionnaire, and postage-paid, return envelope to about 600 first-year students (or as many first-year students as possible, if fewer than 600 were enrolled). The overall response rate was almost 48%, which is typical of a survey of this type.

### **Profile of first-year students**

- Most respondents are female (66%) and about 20 years old. Half of first-year university student respondents live at home, while 3 in 10 live in residence on-campus. Among those who do not currently live on-campus, about 19% said they would have chosen to do so if given the chance.
- The typical student entered university from high school or CEGEP with an average grade between B+ and A-. University proves challenging for many of these students, and they expect to finish their first year of university with an average mark half a grade lower—that is, between B and B+.
- About three-quarters of respondents report graduating from high school or CEGEP in 2000, and thus entered university directly from high school. Most of the remaining students have been out of school for a year or two, although some have come to attend university later in life.
- More than 8 students in 10 report having a full course load both at the time of registration and at the time of the survey. Among the youngest cohort of first-year students (i.e., 18 years of age or younger) some 6% dropped from a full load at registration to a partial load at the time of the survey. Older students tend to have picked up additional courses, going from a partial course load at registration to a full load at the time of the survey.
- Financing for students' education comes from various sources. Just over 4 students in 10 report being employed, and a similar number report receiving scholarships or other financial awards. About 1 student in 3 reports receiving a student loan or other government assistance. Almost 8 students in 10 have at least some concerns about having enough funds to complete their education, including almost 3 students in 10 who are very concerned.

## Decision to go to university

- Students report that many different reasons are important in their decision to attend university. Of the ten reasons tested by the survey, the most important are the two reasons related to future employment. Most students chose to go to university either to *prepare for a specific career* or to *get a good job*.
- A number of other reasons are considered very important in the decision to attend university. About two-thirds of the students report that *getting a general education* and *increasing knowledge in an academic field* are very important in their decision to go to university. About half the students think that *developing a broad base of skills* is also a very important reason to attend university.

## Choosing a university

- Many different reasons are important in the choice of a particular university. Of the 23 reasons tested with students, half the respondents said one of the following is most important: *specific career-related program*, *quality of the academic program*, and *wanting to live close to home*.
- Other reasons, while not considered the single most important, are rated as very important by many, including: *the university has a good reputation*, *accessibility of the campus from their home*, *the size of the university*, *offers of financial assistance*, and *tuition fees*. Each is rated as very important in the choice of university by one-fifth to half of students.
- Typically, students apply to more than one university. About 6 students in 10 report applying to more than one university, and on average, these students applied to three universities. Some 15% of students also report applying to a college. Some 8 students in 10 report they are currently attending the university that was their first choice.
- The vast majority of students report receiving brochures or pamphlets (92%), visiting the campus (81%), or receiving either a visit (77%) or a letter (66%) from a university representative. Regarding personal and media exposure to the university, the most important communication methods affecting their decision to attend a particular university are also the most common: *a campus visit*, *brochures or pamphlets*, and *a visit from a university representative*.
- Overall, over 9 students in 10 report being somewhat or very satisfied with the handling of their application for admission to their current university.

## Experience prior to classes

- About 3 students in 4 sought help or advice when deciding on a program or specific courses. The most common source of advice is other students. Overall, almost 6 in 10 first-year students sought advice from their peers to help in choosing their courses or program. About 4 students in 10 received assistance from Admissions or Registrars' staff, and the same number spoke to an academic advisor for help with choosing their program. About 3 students in 10 received assistance from faculty, and an equal number spoke to a career counsellor when choosing their program.
- According to the students who used these various sources, the most useful advice came from other students. Of those who consulted their peers, over 4 students in 10 rated their help as very useful. Slightly fewer rated the advice of faculty members and academic advisors as very useful.
- Among those students who sought help, about 8 students in 10 say they are somewhat or very satisfied with the help they received when deciding on program or course selections. This includes about 3 students in 10 who are very satisfied. Similarly, overall, 8 students in 10 are satisfied with the process of course registration, including almost 4 in 10 who are very satisfied.
- A majority of students report being able to get into most, if not all, of the courses they wanted. In fact, almost 6 students in 10 report being able to enrol in all of the courses they wanted, and another 3 in 10 were able to enrol in most of the courses they wanted.
- A majority of students, about 6 in 10, report participating in an orientation program. Of those who participated, the vast majority report that they were made to feel welcome during the orientation and were satisfied with the help provided by the orientation. While 8 students in 10 report they are satisfied that the orientation helped them understand the university's academic expectations, less than 1 in 5 is very satisfied.

## University experience

- Most students report at least some success in adjusting to various aspects of university life. Among the various academic adjustments they made, the most successful are *meeting computer literacy required for their study* and *choosing a program of studies to meet their objectives*. In both cases, over 90% who rated these items report "some success" and at least half report being "very successful". Students report the least success in *getting academic advice*. Just over 60% report "some success", including less than one-fifth who report being "very successful".
- Among the personal adjustments that we asked them to consider, students report the most success in *feeling as if they belong at university* and *making new friends with other students*. In each case, the vast majority reports at least some success, while well over 40% report being very successful in making these personal adjustments. Students report the least success in *becoming involved in campus activities*. Only about 4 students in 10

report some success, including 1 in 10 who feels very successful in becoming involved on-campus.

- A majority of students report at least some success in making a number of practical adjustments to campus life. Some three-quarters of students report being very successful in *finding their way around campus*. About 4 students in 10 report being very successful in *finding suitable, affordable housing and using the library*. Only about 2 students in 10 report being very successful in *finding useful information and resources on careers and occupations*.
- About 6 students in 10 are satisfied with the concern shown by their university for them as individuals, including 15% who are very satisfied. About 1 student in 4 is dissatisfied.
- Most students report being satisfied with academic facilities and services, general facilities and services on-campus, and special services offered to specific types of students. About 9 students in 10 report being satisfied with *average size of their classes and the instructional and library facilities*. That said, in each case, less than 1 student in 3 is very satisfied.
- Of the 29 facilities and services tested, the highest satisfaction appears to be with *athletic facilities, access to computer facilities, and campus medical services*, with almost 4 users in 10 rating themselves as very satisfied with each. The lowest satisfaction ratings are reported for *parking facilities and food services*, each receiving a "very satisfied" rating from about 15% of users.
- Some 90% of students report being satisfied or very satisfied with their personal safety on-campus. This is true of both male and female students.
- At least three-quarters of students are positive about faculty in terms of: *providing reasonable access for help outside of class, encouraging student participation in class, and treating them as individuals*. Most agree they are satisfied with the quality of the teaching they have received, including just over one-fifth of students who "strongly agree" with this statement.
- More than 9 students in 10 agree they are satisfied with the decision to attend their current university, including 4 students in 10 who strongly agree.