

# FIVE-YEAR TREND STUDY

## National Student Satisfaction Report

Are today's undergraduates getting more for their money, given the rising costs of higher education?

Based on student perceptions, this report offers a mixed response. In the areas that matter most to students—the quality of instruction and academic advising—student satisfaction has *not* changed noticeably over the past five years. Yet students today are more satisfied with certain aspects of their experience, including their course registration experiences and the adequacy of computer labs and libraries.

This report highlights areas of the college experience where student satisfaction is up, where it has held steady, and where it is down. Unique to this report, the findings shown first are those that matter most to students, followed by findings that matter less to them.

### Why do colleges measure satisfaction?

There are many reasons. Chief among them is that student satisfaction plays an important role in student engagement, learning, and success. Institutions that measure satisfaction can understand this role, can systematically improve the quality of their undergraduate experience, and can offer more educational value to students and families. For more reasons colleges measure satisfaction, please see page 2.

# Are today's students getting more for their money?

## Satisfaction data show mixed response

In today's environment of significant tuition increases, students and parents expect to get more for their money. Are they?

The highlights of this five-year comparative study of student satisfaction show that, while today's students are more satisfied in some key areas—such as course registration and the adequacy of computer laboratories and libraries—they are *not* more satisfied in the critical areas of instruction and academic advising. In sum, students have offered a mixed response.

In a time when colleges are asked to become increasingly accountable for their performance, these findings indicate that *there is still much work to be done on campuses* to meet the rising expectations of students and families.

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-  Quality of instruction
-  Academic advising
-  Safety
-  Tuition
-  Course registration
-  Libraries and computer labs
-  Financial aid delivery

 **Thumbs up—**  
*significant improvement*

 **Thumbs down—**  
*significant decline*

 **Thumbs sideways—**  
*no significant change*

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In this satisfaction study, we asked students to tell us which items mattered most to them. Thus the findings are shown in priority order, with the most important areas to students shown first.

## The source of data

Findings in this report are based on a comparison of national student satisfaction survey data gathered during the 2004-2005 academic year compared with national data on identical survey items gathered during the 1999-2000 academic year.

The data were judged to be representative and statistically significant in size. In 2004-2005, the data sample included 226,432 students from 425 institutions. In 1999-2000, the sample included 235,786 students from 510 institutions. Both samples included a mix of two-year, four-year, public and private institutions.

All students in this study completed the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI), a leading measure of college student satisfaction that also asks students to identify items that matter most to them. For more information on this survey instrument and Noel-Levitz, please see page 11.

## The research scope

This study examined a broad range of 73 items that constitute students' experiences both in and out of the classroom, including items related to:

- Instruction
- Academic advising
- Campus safety
- Course registration
- Admissions
- Tuition and financial aid
- Campus support services
- Campus climate
- Campus facilities
- Campus responsiveness to diverse populations
- Campus level of student-centeredness
- Campus level of concern for the individual
- Campus level of service excellence

**For the complete data included in this study, please see the appendix on pages 6-10.**

### Why do colleges measure student satisfaction?

In addition to meeting demands for accreditation and accountability, research has shown that colleges which measure (and increase) student satisfaction benefit from increased student engagement and retention, higher graduation rates, lower loan default rates, and higher alumni giving rates. Colleges also measure satisfaction to keep up with their competition and to operate more efficiently. But most importantly, colleges that measure satisfaction use the data to continuously improve the student experience, thereby fulfilling their role as good stewards of families' increasingly limited financial resources.

"There are many reasons to assess student satisfaction levels," says Charles Schroeder, a senior executive for Noel-Levitz who previously served at the University of Missouri-Columbia as chief student affairs officer. "Among the most compelling for institutions is that numerous higher education studies have shown that low satisfaction levels contribute to student attrition, which in turn is costly, reduces enrollment, and negatively affects institutional vitality."



## Key findings: Satisfaction in areas that are most important to students



### Quality of instruction—*no significant change*

Students' satisfaction with the quality of instruction has not changed significantly over the past five years. Because instructional quality is of foremost importance to students, and because it is the core of higher education, this static finding is disappointing, particularly in view of the recent emphasis on active learning pedagogies and the availability of new approaches to fostering higher levels of student engagement in the classroom. If colleges want to thrive and survive in the new millennium, they must continue to

work at raising students' (and the public's) perceptions of quality in this area.

On the positive side, students' satisfaction with two issues *related* to the quality of instruction improved markedly. Students gave a “thumbs up” to instructor performance in the areas of 1) providing timely feedback and 2) considering student differences.

[In appendix, see student priority numbers 1, 2, 3, 19, and 36.](#)



### Academic advising—*no significant change*

Next to the quality of instruction, academic advising is consistently the next-most-important area of the college experience to students in our studies of student satisfaction, ahead of registration, campus safety, and support services, to name just a few. In this area, too, satisfaction levels showed no significant change. Thus, as with instructional quality, it is imperative that colleges do more to raise students' (and the public's) perceptions of quality in this area. The benefit of doing so

will be far-reaching. Research has shown that specific elements of a quality advising system improve student retention rates, such as the establishment of a student's relationship with a faculty or staff member and helping students to clarify academic and career goals.

[In appendix, see student priority numbers 7, 11, and 23.](#)



### Safety—*no significant change*

Although students generally feel safe and secure on most campuses, their satisfaction with this area has not changed, which may be attributed as much to insecurities about safety in general after 9/11 as to the safety programs that colleges have in place, which on many campuses have obviously been heightened. Campuses should continue to stay tuned to this issue, as safety and security have become

increasingly important to students and their parents. Students' satisfaction with lighting and the presence of security staff are just two among many areas that campuses are monitoring.

[In appendix, see student priority numbers 8, 30, and 42.](#)



### **Tuition—*significant decline***

In this study, we asked students the ultimate tuition question: How satisfied are they that “tuition paid is a worthwhile investment”? Their responses indicated a decline for this item. Since return on investment is one of the purest tests of value, college and universities must pay attention to this trend. In what ways can higher education increase its quality to offset the rising concerns about costs? And

are there more effective ways that colleges can *communicate* their value so that students and parents can understand what they are getting in exchange for their tuition dollars? Clearly, reconciling access and excellence continues to be a major challenge for colleges.

[In appendix, see student priority number 4.](#)



### **Course registration—*significant improvement***

Compared to five years ago, students’ satisfaction has risen markedly in the area of course registration, also a critically important area to students. Specifically, our findings show that students are significantly more satisfied that they can register for the classes they need with few conflicts and that registration staff are helpful.

Based on these findings, it appears that addressing course scheduling conflicts has

become a higher priority on campuses. This is crucial, because course scheduling conflicts are one of the single biggest causes of extended time to complete a degree, as in cases where students take five or six years to complete a degree instead of four as national data has clearly demonstrated.

[In appendix, see student priority numbers 5 and 25.](#)



### **Libraries and computer labs—*significant improvement***

Student satisfaction is also up markedly in the areas of computer labs and libraries, two areas of campus that offer students access to technology. The findings in this area are not surprising, given the combination of higher campus investments in technology and

Internet access in recent years and students’ increasing demand for, and consumption of, online resources.

[In appendix, see student priority numbers 18 and 28.](#)



### **Financial aid delivery—*significant improvement***

Today’s students are significantly more satisfied that financial aid awards are announced in time to be helpful in college planning. In addition, students are more satisfied that their financial aid counselors are helpful. Since college costs have obviously become a focal point for students and parents, it is encourag-

ing to see that colleges appear to be responding to some of the expectations for responsiveness in financial aid service.

[In appendix, see student priority numbers 29 and 30.](#)

**This report highlights findings from a broad national perspective for the purpose of understanding students’ experience with higher education as a whole. Noel-Levitz also occasionally makes observations on satisfaction levels by type or size of institutions, some of which may be highly significant and which may deviate from the national findings, such as specific experiences at four-year institutions, two-year institutions, and career and private schools, among other sectors.**

## Key findings: Satisfaction in areas that are less important to students



### Tutoring and academic support—*significant improvement*

This area is critically important for some students but not as important for others, so overall it is less critical to students. Nonetheless, higher education should be commended for the improvement in this area, as tutoring and academic support are essential for student success and retention among many student populations. Providing appropriate support services for the students who are

most in need must continue to be a priority, particularly in view of the fact that under-prepared students are entering college in record numbers. In a separate study, we're finding an even greater need in math tutoring support. Campuses must continue working to help students be successful.

[In appendix, see student priority numbers 44 and 53.](#)

***“There are many reasons to assess student satisfaction levels. Among the most compelling for institutions is that numerous higher education studies have shown that low satisfaction levels contribute to student attrition.”***



### Student center—*significant improvement*

Although currently enrolled students view the student center as less important than some other facilities, it is nonetheless an important campus space. Many campuses have invested in better and more attractive physical facilities, including coffee houses and attractive gathering spaces. This has included making updates to buildings that had been out-of-date

in recent years to make them more functional and appealing. In addition, on many campuses, new, state-of-the-art recreation facilities have taken the place of the “traditional” student union and now serve as a major hub for student involvement and social interaction.

[In appendix, see student priority number 64.](#)

Charles Schroeder  
Senior Executive  
Noel-Levitz



### Intercollegiate athletics—*significant decline*

When asked about the relationship between school spirit and intercollegiate athletics, today's students indicated they are significantly less satisfied that intercollegiate athletic programs contribute to positive

school spirit. This finding could be expected, as in the area of athletics, headlines across the country have suggested trouble. A highly combustible combination of recruiting scandals, as well as the politicization of athletics through Title IX, are likely contributing to less satisfaction in this area, as are the changing preferences of today's millennial generation.

[In appendix, see student priority number 72.](#)



## Appendix: The complete findings, in order of priority to today's students

Below are the 73 satisfaction survey items that were measured for this report, in the order today's students rated them in priority.

Satisfaction scoring system: students used a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 being most satisfying.

### Mean satisfaction scores

### Percent satisfied

	Priority	Today	5 Years Ago	Change	Today	5 Years Ago	Change
The content of the courses within my major/program is valuable.	1	5.45	5.40	0.05	80.1%	79.6%	0.5%
The instruction in my major field is excellent.	2	5.43	5.34	0.09	76.5%	74.5%	2.0%
The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent.	3	5.44	5.36	0.08	78.9%	78.2%	0.7%
Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.	4	4.76	4.84	-0.08	62.0%	64.9%	-2.9%
Nearly all faculty are knowledgeable in their fields.	5	5.62	5.58	0.04	81.1%	81.0%	0.1%
I am able to register for classes with few conflicts.	5	5.07	4.97	0.10	69.2%	67.8%	1.4%
My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major/program.	7	5.41	5.37	0.04	73.7%	73.1%	0.6%
I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	8	5.52	5.47	0.05	79.2%	79.3%	-0.1%
The campus is safe and secure for all students.	8	5.43	5.39	0.04	76.3%	76.1%	0.2%
There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	8	5.31	5.22	0.09	74.5%	73.3%	1.2%
My academic advisor is approachable.	11	5.44	5.39	0.05	74.4%	73.8%	0.6%
Major/program requirements are clear and reasonable.	11	5.40	5.33	0.07	76.8%	76.3%	0.5%
Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	11	5.17	5.10	0.07	70.6%	69.7%	0.9%

The priority rank corresponds with the importance score. Items with the same importance score reflect the same rank priority; the ranking then continues with the next appropriate rank reference.

### Mean satisfaction scores

### Percent satisfied

	Priority	Today	5 Years Ago	Change	Today	5 Years Ago	Change
Adequate financial aid is available for most students.	11	4.86	4.77	0.09	61.9%	59.2%	2.7%
There is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus.	15	5.33	5.31	0.02	75.6%	76.3%	-0.7%
Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	16	5.50	5.45	0.05	78.4%	78.1%	0.3%
It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.	17	5.34	5.25	0.09	74.3%	73.0%	1.3%
Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	18	5.37	5.08	0.29	74.9%	69.3%	5.6%
Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	19	5.13	5.02	0.11	70.4%	68.6%	1.8%
This institution shows concern for students as individuals.	19	5.08	4.98	0.10	68.2%	66.6%	1.6%
On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.	21	5.56	5.50	0.06	79.1%	78.7%	0.4%
Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	21	5.42	5.33	0.09	75.7%	74.5%	1.2%
My academic advisor is concerned about my success as an individual.	23	5.13	5.09	0.04	67.2%	66.7%	0.5%
The campus staff are caring and helpful.	24	5.33	5.23	0.10	75.8%	74.3%	1.5%
The personnel in registration are helpful.	25	5.25	5.14	0.11	72.5%	71.2%	1.3%
The amount of student parking is adequate.	25	3.81	3.78	0.03	41.5%	41.4%	0.1%
Admissions staff are knowledgeable.	27	5.19	5.10	0.09	70.2%	68.5%	1.7%
Library resources and services are adequate.	28	5.35	5.09	0.26	74.1%	69.2%	4.9%
Financial aid counselors are helpful.	29	4.93	4.79	0.14	61.9%	58.2%	3.7%



**Mean satisfaction scores**

**Percent satisfied**

	Priority	Today	5 Years Ago	Change	Today	5 Years Ago	Change
Freedom of expression is protected on campus.	30	5.08	4.96	0.12	66.2%	62.8%	3.4%
There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	30	5.06	4.97	0.09	65.7%	63.7%	2.0%
Parking lots are well-lighted and secure.	30	4.86	4.76	0.10	63.3%	61.7%	1.6%
Financial aid awards are announced to students in time to be helpful in college planning.	30	4.76	4.64	0.12	57.3%	53.9%	3.4%
This institution has a good reputation within the community.	34	5.48	5.50	-0.02	75.3%	76.2%	-0.9%
I seldom get the “run-around” when seeking information on this campus.	34	4.76	4.61	0.15	60.0%	57.6%	2.4%
Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course.	36	5.03	4.91	0.12	67.1%	64.8%	2.3%
Faculty care about me as an individual.	37*	5.27	5.18	0.09	74.0%	72.3%	1.7%
Class change (drop/add) policies are reasonable.	37	5.27	5.16	0.11	71.6%	69.8%	1.8%
Billing policies are reasonable.	37	4.79	4.73	0.06	59.5%	58.9%	0.6%
The assessment and course placement procedures are reasonable.	40	5.14	5.05	0.09	68.2%	66.5%	1.8%
Adjunct faculty are competent as classroom instructors.	40	5.09	5.02	0.07	66.9%	65.1%	1.8%
Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	42	4.77	4.65	0.12	50.4%	46.8%	3.7%
Student activities fees are put to good use.	43	4.44	4.38	0.06	49.6%	48.5%	1.1%
The business office is open during hours which are convenient for most students.	44	5.15	5.07	0.08	67.5%	66.3%	1.2%

\*Top 50 percent of items (1-36) most important to students. Remaining items (37-73) less important to students.

**Mean satisfaction scores**

**Percent satisfied**

	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Today</b>	<b>5 Years Ago</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Today</b>	<b>5 Years Ago</b>	<b>Change</b>
Academic support services adequately meet the needs of students.	44	5.09	4.96	0.13	64.9%	61.7%	3.2%
Counseling staff care about students as individuals.	46	4.99	4.88	0.11	60.4%	57.5%	2.9%
My academic advisor helps me set goals to work toward.	46	4.87	4.79	0.08	59.9%	58.2%	1.7%
Channels for expressing student concerns are readily available.	46	4.70	4.58	0.12	55.1%	52.5%	2.6%
Students disciplinary procedures are fair.	49	4.96	4.91	0.05	61.0%	58.8%	2.2%
Living conditions in the residence halls are comfortable.	49	4.41	4.28	0.13	49.4%	46.2%	3.2%
Administrators are approachable to students.	51	5.08	4.97	0.11	66.5%	64.0%	2.5%
Admissions counselors respond to prospective students' unique needs and requests.	51	5.03	4.91	0.12	62.7%	59.5%	3.3%
Tutoring services are readily available.	53	5.24	5.11	0.13	66.9%	63.8%	3.2%
There is a strong commitment to racial harmony on this campus.	53	5.19	5.08	0.11	67.2%	64.8%	2.4%
Graduate teaching assistants are competent as classroom instructors.	55	4.90	4.83	0.07	57.8%	56.3%	1.5%
Bookstore staff are helpful.	56	5.32	5.22	0.10	72.6%	71.2%	1.4%
Admissions counselors accurately portray the campus in their recruiting practices.	56	4.94	4.83	0.11	60.5%	57.6%	2.9%
There is an adequate selection of food available in the cafeteria.	58	4.10	4.07	0.03	45.2%	44.3%	0.9%
New student orientation services help students to adjust to college.	59	5.12	5.02	0.10	64.9%	62.7%	2.2%

### Mean satisfaction scores

### Percent satisfied

	Priority	Today	5 Years Ago	Change	Today	5 Years Ago	Change
The staff in the health services area are competent.	60	4.84	4.74	0.10	56.0%	52.9%	3.1%
Library staff are helpful and approachable.	61	5.38	5.27	0.11	72.1%	70.4%	1.8%
I feel a sense of pride about my campus.	62	5.02	5.05	-0.03	65.3%	66.5%	-1.2%
I can easily get involved in campus organizations.	63	5.14	5.10	0.04	66.7%	65.7%	1.0%
The student center is a comfortable place for students to spend their leisure time.	64	4.98	4.86	0.12	62.3%	59.5%	2.8%
Residence hall regulations are reasonable.	65	4.50	4.49	0.01	50.1%	49.3%	0.8%
I generally know what is happening on campus.	66	4.90	4.80	0.10	61.3%	59.1%	2.1%
Most students feel a sense of belonging here.	67	5.18	5.11	0.07	69.3%	68.1%	1.2%
The student handbook provides helpful information about campus life.	67	5.08	5.07	0.01	64.3%	65.2%	-0.9%
Residence hall staff are concerned about me as an individual.	69	4.73	4.73	0.00	53.5%	52.5%	1.0%
Males and females have equal opportunities to participate in intercollegiate athletics.	70	5.13	5.03	0.09	60.4%	57.3%	3.1%
There are sufficient number of weekend activities for students.	71	4.33	4.25	0.08	44.9%	42.2%	2.7%
The intercollegiate athletic programs contribute to a strong sense of school spirit.	72	4.43	4.54	-0.11	46.0%	47.6%	-1.6%
A variety of intramural activities are offered.	73	4.82	4.80	0.02	54.6%	52.6%	2.0%



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### Questions? Want more information?

If you have questions about this report, please contact Richard Miller, Noel-Levitz research consultant, at [richard-miller@noellevitz.com](mailto:richard-miller@noellevitz.com).

If you have questions about the Student Satisfaction Inventory and how it is used on campuses, please contact Julie Bryant or Lisa Vittetoe at 1-800-876-1117 or [julie-bryant@noellevitz.com](mailto:julie-bryant@noellevitz.com) or [lisa-vittetoe@noellevitz.com](mailto:lisa-vittetoe@noellevitz.com).

### About Noel-Levitz and the survey instrument used in this study

Noel-Levitz has served the higher education community for more than 30 years. Campuses turn to Noel-Levitz for consultation and resources for student retention and assessment, student recruitment, and marketing.

The survey instrument used in this study was the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory, an instrument that examines a broad range of 73 items that comprise the college experience. The inventory utilizes a unique dual measurement system: students assess how satisfied they are with an item *and* indicate the level of priority they assign to it. The two scores are then computed into gap scores that assist institutions with prioritizing campus improvements.

The Student Satisfaction Inventory has been administered by more than 1,700 colleges and universities since its inception in 1994. In addition to revealing national satisfaction trends, the inventory provides participating campuses with national benchmark comparison gap scores by institution type to help put the findings in context. In addition, a companion survey for campus personnel, the Institutional Priorities Survey, identifies areas of agreement between students and personnel, helping to build consensus for change.

To learn more about the Student Satisfaction Inventory or to see samples of any survey in the Noel-Levitz family of satisfaction surveys, please visit [www.noellevitz.com/SSI](http://www.noellevitz.com/SSI) (click on "samples" at the top).

**Find it online.**

This report and related satisfaction reports from Noel-Levitz are posted online at [www.noellevitz.com/benchmark](http://www.noellevitz.com/benchmark).

