Students' Perceptions of Their First-Year University Experience:

What Universities Need to Know

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover some of the difficulties that first-year students have when they begin university. It was important to get the students to articulate those difficulties, in their own words, so that a better understanding could be attained. As expected, most of the difficulties centred on the institution itself. Students felt alienated from the university in terms of other students, the staff members, and their instructors. They were overwhelmed with the difference between their secondary schools and the university despite knowing that there would be differences. Some of the issues they dealt with when they first entered the university were very basic such as discovering where their classrooms were, where the washrooms were, and how to find the library. They also dealt with loneliness because they did not have friends who attended the same university and they found it difficult to make friends. In addition, the website for the university was bewildering and not easy to navigate for most of the students who responded to the survey. There were suggestions offered, by the students, as to what universities can do to better support and retain first-year students as they make the transition to higher education.

Student Perceptions of First-Year University

The first-year of university can be very stressful for many students. How they cope with that stress will often determine how successful they will be in their studies. In my experience, teaching first-year students, I have often found that students have difficulties that I did not consider. It was, therefore, important to hear from the students themselves as to what some of the problems that they faced were and how they handled those problems on a daily basis. The rationale for the importance of listening to students' perspectives is supported by Becker, Geer and Hughes (1995, as cited in Gibney, Moore, Murphy & O'Sullivan, 2011) who argued that it is important to hear from the students themselves as to what their experiences are when they first enter university. If students' voices are not taken into consideration when planning or implementing programs then the university is left to try to guess how to help first-year students be more successful. The problem with this approach is that the issues, identified by the administration, might not be the actual issues that students deal with when attending university for the first time. Pre-packaged programs tend to treat all first-year students the same and this is not the reality considering some students are just out of high school (18 years old), some are more mature (21 and up), some are returning to university after a break, some are International students attending without the benefit of structured secondary schools, and some already consider themselves part of a marginalized population even before they begin attending classes. In their research Gibney, Moore, Murphy, and O'Sullivan (2011) stated it is important not to group all first-year experiences into a *one size fits all approach* and similarly they said that we can't treat all first-year students as if they were the same. They're not, and university personnel do a disservice to them if they do not respond to them as individuals rather than as a cohort. If

universities are interested in retaining first-year students they have to address the concerns that students have and work to support them.

Awang, Kutty, and Ahmad (2014) accentuate the importance of students being supported in their transition from secondary institutions to higher education institutions in terms of ensuring that students feel they belong in university. The authors also emphasize the importance of social support from family, peers, and the university community at large. Gibney, et al (2011) say that "all students enter college [university] with a set of expectations that shape their responses to their new environment" (p. 359). Kantanis (2000, as cited in Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosenstreich, & Dobson, 2014) also stressed the importance of students' experiences during their first semester of university which shape their decisions to "continue or discontinue their studies" (p. 212). The research of Wilcoxson (2010) corroborated this finding by stating that "approximately half of all attrition occurs in the first year of studies" (p. 624). Part of the problem is that some students do not adapt to the new expectations of university as quickly as they need to do in order to be successful (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Another issue raised by Lowe and Cook (2003) is that many students who drop out are just not interested in pursuing university education once they enter the institution. This lack of interest leads to students dropping out of university which is independent of any other factors.

Lowe and Cook (2003) discussed some of the reasons why students enter university and how those reasons are incompatible with the reality of studying at a university. They discovered that many students expect that the academic demands will be similar to what they experienced in their secondary schools and that they will have an "exciting social life" (p. 55). When these expectations are not met students become dissatisfied with their experiences. They can encounter difficulty with things such as their lack of study skills and their inability to meet the

new demands placed on them especially as it relates to them becoming independent learners. Lowe and Cook (2003) found that many students experience difficulty with being self-directed learners. These new demands manifest themselves in students becoming dissatisfied with their instructors and with the university environment. The problem has to do with incorrect assumptions about what attending a higher education institute involves and as Lowe and Cook (2003) discovered, "inaccurate prior perceptions . . . contributes to a disengagement from the educational (and social) aspects of university life" (p. 74).

Similarly, Leese (2010) hypothesized that students do not feel a part of the institutions they attend because they are only on campus for their classes. In an effort to provide information to students, most universities provide a two-day orientation at the beginning of their first term. One of the problems with this approach is that the information provided is very generic and students often find that they need more help than a two-day orientation can provide to them. Students need ongoing support to answer their questions and help them navigate the new demands on their time and intellect especially during their first semester (Beaumont, Moscrop, & Canning, 2016; Leese, 2010). McInnis (2001) emphasizes the fact that "students are at their most vulnerable in the first year in terms of their likelihood of academic failure and they are at most risk with respect to a range of potential social, emotional, health, and financial problems" (p. 106). He also says that institutions should focus on first-year students since the effects of attrition are costly for both individuals and universities. Williams (1980, as cited in McInnis, 2001) reported that how students experience their first term at university was important as it can lead to high failure and withdrawal of students if they are not successful.

Alderman, Towers and Bannah (2012) advocate the need to gather students' perceptions of higher education. Similarly, Harvey (2011, as cited in Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012)

found that "if an institution takes action based on what students tell it, satisfaction increases over time and students are more likely to remain engaged in the process [of learning]" (p. 264). Alderman et al (2012) concluded from their analysis of student feedback that "students are widely regarded as important stakeholders in universities; that surveys of their experiences are established components of evaluation systems; and that feedback from them has the potential to contribute to improvement in the quality of learning and teaching" (p. 274). The importance of hearing from students with regards to the issues they dealt with in their first-year of university could potentially assist administrators in designing programs that would provide needed support to first-year students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate some of the reasons why students experience difficulty making the transition from secondary school to university. Information gathered from a S*urvey of early leavers: Universities and colleges in Manitoba* (2007) found that approximately twenty-five percent of first-year students' drop out of university, despite rating themselves as having been academically well-prepared for their studies. The Early Leavers Survey was a collaborative undertaking on the part of the Council on Post-Secondary Education, Employment Manitoba Division of Competitiveness, Training and Trade (formerly Employment and Training Services Branch of Advanced Education and Training), and the universities and colleges of Manitoba. In order to gain a better understanding of some of the difficulties students encounter in their first year, and why those difficulties might lead them to leave university, it was important to listen to what students had to say about their university experience.

Research Question

The study was guided by the following question:

1. What are some of the issues that students identify as having influenced, positively or

negatively, their first-year experience at university?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were all from a mid-size Western Canadian University that offers both

undergraduate and graduate programs. This university is committed to diversity in their student

population and is dedicated to providing access to students who might not, otherwise, be able to

attend university due to factors such as age, grades, or socio-economic constraints. The student

population includes many different cultures with 25% of the students considered from non-

traditional populations including 13% who are international students, and a further 12% who

self-identify as Indigenous.

A total of 713 students completed the on-line survey. There was a 100% completion rate

with no students abandoning the survey part way through the questions. I did not ask for the

respondents to provide their gender as the study was designed to find out what were some of the

issues that caused first-year students difficulties. These questions were not designed to gather

gender specific data.

Procedures

An email inviting students to participate in a study concerning their first-year experiences

was sent to all students registered at the target university. The email made it clear that all

students, including those in upper years, could participate in the study. A link to a one-time, on-

line survey, was included in the email. If students agreed to participate they were instructed to

follow the link to the actual survey which was administered by a secure on-line survey company. The survey consisted of 18 items that included both open and closed type questions (see Appendix 1 for the survey).

The survey remained open for three weeks. It was closed at that time due to the fact that no new responses were recorded for the previous five days. The results were disseminated based on the answers to the questions posed in the survey.

Results and Discussion

The results are reported as descriptive statistics based on the answers provided on the survey and consist of the actual numbers/percentages of students who answered the questions. The use of descriptive statistics afforded me the opportunity to summarize the student information in a more meaningful way. Descriptive statistics also made it possible to discover the patterns that emerged from the answers provided by the students.

Year in University

The first question asked students what year they were currently registered in at university. The numbers were broken down into the following categories: 263 first-year students, 150 second-year students, 153 third-year students, 76 fourth-year students, and 71 fifth-year students. It was valuable to get a cross-section of respondents as student experiences often change depending on the year they are in their studies.

Rate Their First-Year Experience

The second question asked students to rate their first-year university experience. The choices were: great, good, okay, and poor. Sixteen point seven percent (119) of the students rated it as great, 47.1% (335) rated it as good, 32.2% (229 students) rated it as okay, and 6.9% (49 students) rated it as poor. As can be seen from the numbers, 454 students appeared satisfied

with their first-year experience while 278 students thought their first-year experience was only

okay or poor. The number of students who were not happy with their first-year experience is a

cause for concern as those students who are not satisfied with their initial university experience

tend to be the ones who drop out and do not complete a degree (Williams, 1980, as cited in

McInnis, 2001).

Positive Experience

The third question asked students to explain their answer to question two regarding their

first-year experience. Some of the positives that were listed by the students who rated their first-

year as great were that the university provided a good learning environment, the fact that the

university was smaller and therefore class sizes were correspondingly smaller, their professors

were very good, they had the opportunity to meet other students, the orientation and tours were

beneficial, and they enjoyed the level of independence that attending university provided. One

of the students said: "[I] felt welcomed into the much larger university community and

succeeded academically." Another student made the following comments that expressed what

many other students said: "good because staff and students are helpful, great services that

familiarize students with campus with also a lot of support groups. People generally are always

willing to help." Another student summed up their first year by saying "I enjoyed my classes,

and I have had excellent experiences with my professors, whether it was just asking a question,

getting help on a topic, or simply just chatting. There have also been lots of fun and interesting

events and opportunities for students and I have met some really nice, interesting people."

Negative Experiences

   a) **Feeling alone**

For those students who rated their experience as good, okay, or poor the answers were varied. A number of students said it was hard to make friends and they felt alone and lost at the university. They attributed this to a lack of opportunities to get together with other first-year students, and the fact that everyone seemed to stay by themselves. They mentioned that it would have been beneficial to have more gatherings available for first-year students so that they could form a university community. A typical comment from the students was "[I] didn't know what was going on. [I] felt like I wasn't given accurate information, in almost everything. The school was very confusing. Was hard to find the places I needed to get to. I didn't know anybody and found it hard to get to know anyone. It was very isolating."   This was in sharp contrast to what they had experienced in their high schools where they knew everyone and they expected university to be exactly the same. As one student said "I was expecting the same kind of environment as I had at high school. I expected to get to know people in my classes but that did not happen. I was so alone all the time that it became hard to go to classes."

   b) **Academic Issues – Professors and Academic Advisors**

One student was very critical of the university as a whole "I am not impressed with how unorganized everything about the university is. Also, some of the grading does not make any sense. I had a TA mark a paper and she gave everyone low marks and my professor explained that it was because she was grumpy when she was marking them. I don't think that should make a difference at all for how papers are marked. Extremely unprofessional." The students who mentioned having professors who were not professional was a sentiment echoed by many of the respondents. This is an example of what one student said "I chose okay because I don't

appreciate professors who are rude, [who are] very unorganized, [who] lack empathy, and then

have the nerve to blame the school system. I had to drop a course I was really interested in

because of that." Another student expressed her concerns that "academic advisors are not

helpful [and an] Academic writing professor was condescending when I spoke to her after my

first assignment. I explained [that] I had always done well with writing, [and] she then said that

all you have to do is show up for high school [and] this is university. I then told her I was 30

years old and she told me 'well aren't you aging nicely'. I was not expecting that level of

rudeness at university from one of my professors"

Students referenced having professors who did not seem to care about them or their

issues. They felt that some professors did not make their expectations clear, and assigned vague

assignments with no direction. Similarly, they found that student advisors appeared to be

annoyed at their questions and were not helpful. This comment is indicative of the comments

made by many students "I didn't understand the voluntary withdrawal date for my first two years

and I now have three F's on my transcript."   Also, "I enjoyed being part of the university but I

was pretty lost all the time. I found it difficult to understand how to register for courses and how

to find the books I needed. I was poorly advised on which courses to take my first year for my

science degree that it was pretty much wasted. Whenever I reached out for help or advising I

was always told something different." And another student found that "I was not given the right

information and it ended up causing me to add another year to my degree."

c) Issues Un-related to Academics

One student's response was very personal but there were other students who also felt

excluded due to issues such as health problems "I am highly scent sensitive with a rare

autoimmune disease. The U of W does not refrain students from wearing scents (only suggest

they cut down on the use) and the place is filthy." The student goes on to say that "The cafeteria is disgusting and is referred to as 'choke and puke.' The instructors are mostly at best sub-par, and are there not so much to teach but to collect a pay cheque. There is an odd gem in the group but overall sub-par. The cost of books at the U of W bookstore are marked up significantly and often do not offer *new*. I need new [textbooks] to ensure I am not picking up unnecessary germs. The bathrooms are slightly one level up from outhouses and stink constantly like a year's worth of unclean urine and feces. The fees charged are astronomical and [students] are forced to pay them. For an older student I have no need to use the gym etc. so should not be charged those fees. The additional $260 a year for a UPASS [bus pass that all students must pay for] that I will never use is another [fee] forced down our throat." While this is only one student's concerns other students expressed a sense of disbelief that the campus was so dirty and referenced the washrooms and the cafeteria as two areas that needed attention.

d) Stress

The students also expressed feeling a lot of stress in their first-year which led to them feeling overwhelmed with trying to balance their studies with work and family commitments. They said this was a direct result of not being good time managers since it was all up to them now to keep track of assignments. A typical comment was "I found the courses fine but overall [first-year] experience was dull and lonely. I was unprepared and ultimately alone. I did not connect with anyone at the university whatsoever. My days were long and hard and the stress I felt was magnified by the fact that I had no one to share the experience with."

e) Transition from High School to University

The transition from high school to university was very difficult for most students because the assignments were much harder, the tests were worth more than they were used to, and they

often had no friends to support them like they had in high school. One of the students said "I didn't transition well. I was not emotionally ready for the new stage of life. I overloaded my schedule and didn't choose the best activities for my health and wellness." There were several students who thought the same way and as this student put it "I did not feel welcome. There are no places to sit. I sat on the floor the majority of the time, and I never felt safe. Security wouldn't patrol and random drunk people from the street would wonder the halls." In addition, other students wanted more guidance as expressed by this student "It was a confusing transition from high school to first year. [I] wish there was more guidance."

f) More Support and Guidance

The students expressed a need to have someone to communicate with if they had questions. The two-day orientation, for them, was not enough because even those students who had gone to orientation still had questions that were not answered at the time. The students suggested that it would be beneficial to have a FAQ website just for first-year students that would answer questions that they had regarding registration, where to go for help, and lists of university clubs they could join.

Students found the university campus confusing as the signage, for things like washrooms, was not clear. They said that just having the gender of washrooms posted on the doors, with small signs, was not sufficient as they often walked right past the doors without realizing what they were. The students said they wished signs were posted clearly on the ceiling so they could find their way around campus. They also found the number of buildings bewildering and were not able to find the buildings when they had to change classes.

Some students expressed a concern with the safety of the campus and the fact that their lockers had been broken into and things stolen, like their jackets. They also were afraid of

walking to and from classes due to being accosted by individuals on the street. As one student said "I like the location being central and accessible but do not feel safe walking blocks to my car. [There is a] need for visible security on foot. I see fights, drunks, prostitutes, people with mental health issues and cat callers from nearby homes."

There were also issues with accessing support services in their first year. As one student put it "[first-year] was the worst year of my university career. There were services available that could have helped me but I didn't know where to turn to." This was repeated by other students who also expressed their frustration with not having enough ongoing supports in place to help them succeed.

Why Students decided to go to University

a) To get an education

The majority (54%) said they went to university because they wanted to get an education. They referenced the fact that an education was necessary if they wanted to get ahead in life, if they wanted to get a job that paid more than minimum wage, and that they knew that a high school diploma was not enough if they wanted to achieve something with their life. As one student put it "because I need a degree to work in the field that I want to work in. I, also, feel that a university degree will expand my horizons and [I will] become a smarter person." The majority of the students' responses were very similar and can be summed up in this quote "because having a university diploma is necessary to get a decent job."

b) Necessary in Today's Society

Many of the respondents said that university is almost forced on students these days as their options would be limited without a university education. As one student said "because practically every job these days requires some sort of degree even if it isn't really relevant or

needed." This group also said that they just liked learning and university was the next step in the learning process. One student said he/she went to university "because that's what I thought I was supposed to do." And another said "because the high school diploma has been devalued to the point where post-secondary education is all but forced upon young adults." There were a number of students (15%) who already had a career in mind such as becoming a teacher, a lawyer, a pharmacist, or a doctor and that was the reason they went to university. One student expressed it this way "Because what I aspire to do with my life requires a university degree." A small percentage (2.4%) came to university because they wanted to change their career. One of the students said "I did not like what I was doing currently as a career and wanted to expand my knowledge to obtain a job in a different field."

c) Family Pressure

In addition, 6% of the students said that they felt pressure from their families to go to university and that they did not feel that they had an option not to attend. One of the students said "going to university runs in my family. Both my parents, and my siblings have post-secondary education." Or as another student put it "I don't really think I had a choice not to go. It's something I was expected to do." One student summed it up by saying "I had always wanted to pursue my education after high school. My parents had always encouraged me to go to university, and I grew up assuming it was just something that everyone did." Another student said "I had to. Everyone in my family did so I was expected to [go as well]." And one student said "I was forced to. I wanted to take a break and figure what I want to do in life but my parents wouldn't let me." And, "it was never an option for me. If I didn't go to university my family most likely would have lost respect for me."

Did they find university was what they expected?

Sixty-eight percent (480 students) said that university was what they were expecting, and 33.8% (237 students) said it was not what they expected.   Question six asked them a follow-up question regarding what were some of the things that they were expecting when they began university. Eight percent thought that they would meet a lot of new people and make friends, five percent thought that there would be more social gatherings, and ten percent of the students thought that there would be more places for them to study. They also thought that there would be more help in choosing their courses and more direction in which courses they needed for their career choice. The rest of the answers varied with some students who said they expected their professors to be helpful, they thought classes would be harder, that they would have heavy workloads filled with assignments and readings, that they would find an environment that was more academically challenging than high school, that class sizes would be larger than they were used to, and that the amount of stress would not be so great. Three percent had no expectations.

What happened at university that was unexpected?

Five percent said nothing happened that they did not expect. Seven percent said they did not expect that they would be able to connect to students and faculty as easily as they did, or that there would be clubs that they could join where they could meet other people. While 5% of the students had a totally different experience and said they did not expect it to be so hard to make friends and they did not expect to feel so alone during their first-year.

a) **Professor Attitudes**

Students also referenced the fact that they did not expect that most of their professors would actually care about them or make the effort to get to know them (5%). These students were pleasantly surprised that their professors were approachable since they had been warned by

their secondary school teachers that university professors would not get to know their names and that they would not be able to ask questions in class. In contrast, a small portion of the students (2%) said that their professors were not helpful and appeared not to care about their students and were just there for the money. According to the students, these professors were not professional in their dealing with students, were not prepared, were rude to students, marked overly hard, provided busywork assignments, did not answer emails, were not available during office hours, the courses seemed irrelevant, and they did not appear to be interested in either the content or their students. The seeming opposite viewpoints was not unexpected since everyone's experiences are different and dependent on their expectations as was pointed out by Lowe and Cook (2003).

b) Unrelated to Academics

The students (3%) also did not expect so much free time between classes with nowhere to go to study or do work. A number of students (4%) did not expect to be doing so poorly in their classes considering they were good students in high school. These students also said they did not expect the lack of support from student advisors who often gave them incorrect information, tried to dissuade them from their class choices, and were not helpful when students were requesting advice. Students said they did not expect textbooks to be so expensive since they had never had to purchase textbooks before and they also referenced the hidden costs associated with being a student such as lab fees, bus pass, gym fee, and high cost of food with few choices. They also did not expect to get lost all the time during their first weeks, and not be able to find essential services such as washrooms. They also did not expect the amount of reading they had to do to keep up with their courses.

Things Students Worry About at University

Question eight asked students what were some of the things they worried about at university. Not surprisingly 86% said that they worried about their grades, followed by 71% who worried about balancing school with their other commitments such as work, family, and friends. Sixty-seven percent worried about doing their assignments, 63% worried about managing their time, 59% worried about being able to afford their textbooks, 59% also worried about failing, 58% worried about being able to pay for their courses, 57% worried about not doing as well as expected. The complete chart of all the things students worry about is presented below.

Value	Percent	Count
Grades	86.0%	609
Balancing work load with my other commitments (e.g. work, family, friends).	71.5%	506
Assignments	67.5%	478
Time-Management	63.7%	451
Paying for Textbooks	59.0%	418
Fear of Failure	59.5%	421
Paying for Courses	58.2%	412
Not doing as well as expected	57.1%	404
Trying to Determine Instructor Expectations	52.4%	371

Finding time to study	47.6%	337
Making Friends	41.2%	292
Feeling Isolated	38.8%	275
Being the only one who does not understand what to do in a course	35.5%	251
Difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching	33.1%	234
Writing Skills	32.1%	227
Buying Food	30.5%	216
Feeling under-prepared for university study	30.4%	215
The Level of Independence Required to Succeed	25.4%	180
Being able to understand the academic language used at university	22.7%	161
Covering Rent	22.6%	160
Not having the computer skills necessary to navigate the university online platforms such as Nexus, Web Adviser, Library	6.4%	45
Other	8.3%	59

Students have a lot of pressure on them to do well at university so it was expected that the majority of the students would worry about their grades. Maintaining their grade point average [GPA] is a very real concern for those students who want to enter professional colleges such as medicine, dentistry, and law to name a few. These students know they can't afford not to do well in a course and the stress of maintaining an A average can be debilitating for some students. Similarly, almost 60% of the students fear failure and list this as one of the stresses they have in their life. The students acknowledge that the stress of succeeding in their classes is self-inflicted which is why almost 64% say that they have to develop better time management skills so they can balance their school work with other commitments such as family, friends, and work. There are very few things that the university institute could do to help alleviate student stress due to the fact that they are individual stresses and have to be managed by the students themselves.

How Students Coped with Stress

Seventy-six percent said they talked to family and friends, 61.7% listened to music, and 50% exercised. From an instructor's point of view, I know that students who are not doing well start skipping classes when assignments are due and this was verified by the fact that almost 24% of the students surveyed said they skip classes when they feel stressed. The complete chart is presented below. It is notable that not many students accessed the support services that are available to students at the university. For example only 10% went to see a counsellor, 9% went to speak to an advisor, and only 1% sought help from a university support group.

Value	Percent	Count
Talk to Family or Friends	76.4%	531
Listen to Music	61.7%	429

Exercise	49.5%	344
Skip Classes	23.9%	166
Alcohol	19.1%	133
Speak to Instructors	17.3%	120
Go and see a Counsellor	10.1%	70
Speak to a Student Adviser	8.6%	60
Drugs	6.2%	43
University Support Group	1.6%	11
Other	24.2%	168

It was interesting to read the transcripts of the students when they discussed how they coped with the stress of going to university in their first-year. What made it interesting was that only 17% said they spoke to their instructors. This was surprising since instructors are the only ones in a position to assist students when it comes to issues like assignment deadlines and keeping up with the course readings. Students should be encouraged to speak to their instructors when they find themselves falling behind. I think it is safe to say that most instructors want their students to succeed and one way that instructors can help alleviate some of the stress for students is by providing extensions so they are able to complete assignments.

How Do Students Choose Courses?

The overwhelming majority (68.5%) choose their courses because they were required for their major. A further 26% said they spoke to an advisor to help them make the choice of what

courses they should take, 17% chose them because they had been recommended by a friend or family member, and 8% chose a course because their friend was taking the same course.

Did Students Drop a Course in Their First-Year? Why did they?

Sixty percent said they did not drop any courses, and 40% said they did drop a course. Question twelve asked students why they dropped a course. Eighteen percent said they had no interest in the course, 17% did not like the instructor, 14% said the course was too hard, and 12% said their marks were too low.

The fact that 40% of first-year students ended up dropping a course should be a cause for concern to university administrators. Forty percent is a high percentage of students who begin a course but do not finish it. Students who dropped courses highlighted the fact that the course descriptions often did not provide enough information as to what the course was actually going to be about so they could not make an informed decision when registering for their courses. They said their decisions for registering for a course were based on the name of the course which they said was often not what they expected. They referenced the fact that they did not have enough information to be able to choose courses they would be interested in.

Students also dropped courses because they did not like their instructors. As a result, they ended up not attending class which made it difficult to do their assignments. This reason is not something that can be ameliorated due to clashing personalities. Each student reacts differently to varying teaching styles and how well they like their instructors is so personal. An instructor that one student doesn't like doesn't mean that the instructor is not a good instructor nor does it mean that other students in the class do not like them.

Issues with First-Year University

Question thirteen asked students if they had any issues during their first year, and to explain what those issues were. One hundred and forty of the 713 students said they had no issues with their first year of studies (20%). The other 80% of the students had various issues that are discussed below.

a) Issues With Professors

Of the students who had issues, 55 said they had issues with their instructors. They expressed the opinion that their professors did not seem to be fair in terms of providing guidance as to what was expected in the course, they also felt that the marking was too hard for a first-year course especially because they had to figure out what to do with little or no guidance, they had difficulty understanding their professors due to accents, their professors were not prepared, were often sarcastic, and they did not feel they could give their opinions in class.

b) Transition Between High School and University

The students also found that there was a lack of consistency between classes that was confusing for them to figure out. By this they meant that the expectations between instructors was not consistent and so they had difficulty knowing the types of behaviour and assignments that were expected in each class. For example, they said that some instructors did not seem to care that students were on their phones during class even though other students found it distracting while other instructors did not tolerate cell phone use at all. It was their opinion that assignments in some courses were marked easier than in other courses. They also said that some instructors provided lots of guidance while others expected students to already know what they had to do in the class.

Sixty students said the transition between high school and university caused them problems in terms of knowing what to do, finding their way around campus, time-management, being prepared for the types of writing needed in university versus how they wrote in high school, finding places to study, the cost of food, cost of books, and the amount of reading they were expected to do in their classes.

c) Advisors Not Helpful

Thirty-six students found talking to advisors problematic because they said the advisors were not helpful, were often rude to them when they asked questions, did not explain voluntary withdrawal dates, did not offer helpful advice for their concerns such as class choices, or issues with web platforms such as nexus and web advisor.

d) Personal

Thirty-three students characterized their issues as more personal such as their inability to make friends which left them feeling alone and isolated at the university which contrasted with their high school experiences where they had friends. They thought that it would be a lot easier to make friends and the fact that they couldn't make friends resulted in them not wanting to go to school. The lack of social opportunities also led to them feeling stressed because they had no one to talk to about their problems.

The issues that students had in attending first-year university are similar to other issues that have already been discussed such as problems with instructors, transitioning to university, university advisors, and their lack of friends. These four issues came up again and again as I read through the transcripts. The students, who raised these issues, were disappointed to find that university was not like high school in terms of them feeling welcomed by their instructors or the advisors. This might be due to their unrealistic expectations of what university should be like

and their disappointment that it did not meet their expectations. These findings are corroborated

by the research of Lowe and Cook (2003) who also found that many of the problems students

identified were due to their incorrect assumptions about what it was like to study at a university.

What would have made their first-year experience more successful?

    a) **More Social Activities**

Fifty-nine students expressed a need for more social activities geared specifically to first-year

students where they could meet other first-year students and get to know them. The students

suggested that the university could have a freshmen week, where every day whether it was

during the day or the evening, that first-year students could get together to participate in fun

activities. They thought these activities would provide a good place to mingle with other first-

year students so they wouldn't feel so alone. One of the students said "At bigger universities,

they do a freshman week so the university provides itineraries and activities through the day and

night to start to get to know more people and to form friendships before the stress of school

starts. I believe they should do this above orientation day." Some mature students expressed the

wish that some of the orientation activities, such as a tour of campus, could be made available to

those students who only attended in the evenings.

    b) **Professors and Advisors Could be More Approachable**

Forty-six students said they would have felt more comfortable attending university if the

advisors and professors were more approachable. They often felt intimidated speaking to their

instructors and they felt their professors could have been more organized and could have put in

more effort to be ready for classes. They complained that the university advisors were often

dismissive and they did not provide guidance as to what courses students needed for their

programs.

c) **Support Services**

In addition, students wished there were more workshops available to help students with things such as time-management, how to register using the online website, explanation of student services, and basic study skills such as note-taking, and how to prepare for exams. The students felt that even if the university could not offer face to face workshops that some *you tube* videos would help them prepare for classes when they were experiencing difficulties. This lack of knowing where to go for help seemed to be an issue with many students. As one third year student said "[it would have helped me in my first year if I] toured the campus, learned the library system (especially the online portion to do work from home). [Also] learning all the available services for students: free gym membership, food banks, peer tutoring, counselling, etc. It was well into my third year before I realized we had all these." Another student when discussing what would have made their first-year more successful said "More awareness of and access to resources for understanding and fitting in with the school, focused attention, and listening to my needs. Better school maps with indication of where study spaces are, identification of office wings, notation of gender neutral washrooms."

One student said the following which was indicative of what other students also expressed "I know the university is supposed to be more independent especially compared to high school but it would have been good if they explained everything more clearly. I know I missed orientation which probably was a big thing to miss but for people like me who missed orientation, I just wished they explained how important it is to check your web advisor and nexus constantly and also your student email because I missed a lot of important emails that I didn't know about until after. Also, I was so lost the first time I tried to print something at the university because I didn't know you had to put money in your account first. I didn't know. These are kind of little things

and they might have been covered in orientation but it would have been nice if someone stressed that everything is basically done online and how you should check your school accounts everyday."

Twenty-nine students wished they had an upper-year mentor who could help them with any questions they had and who could reassure them that all first-year students had similar issues. The interesting thing about this point is that the university, where the study took place, actually has a mentor program but the first-year students, who answered the survey, were not aware of the program. Some of the other things that students identified as causing them difficulty was they felt they needed better English writing skills. The students who mentioned this knew about the tutoring centre but they wished there were tutoring times that were available just for first-year students as that would have made them more comfortable in going to see the tutors that were available.

The significance about some of the first-year students' concerns is that the university, where the study took place, has an excellent guide for first-year students that includes all of the important information the students said they needed. This is available online. Students appear to not be aware of this resource and question where to find information. What this tells me is that the students are not accessing this document because they do not know where to find it. We often take for granted that students are tech savvy and this is frequently not the case. Just because students have smart phones and can play games or look up information on *Google* the assumption is that they will know how to navigate the university websites. This is not true since it is obvious that first-year students are not aware of this online guide. Perhaps the university could email all first-year students a copy of the orientation booklet so that students would know that there are supports available to them and they would not have to feel so alone when they

begin their studies. The students complained that they often wandered around the hallways

looking for services that they could not find and eventually they gave up and went home without

the answers to their questions. Just having the material available online does not mean that

students will be able to find what they are looking for and this proves to be a very frustrating

experience for most first-year students.

Differences with Attending Upper-Year Courses

Question fifteen asked students how their experience with upper-year courses differed

from their first-year experiences. One hundred and thirty-seven students said that they were

more comfortable with upper year courses because they had figured out the university setting

which made them more confident. They knew their way around campus, they understood the

expectations better, were more comfortable asking questions in class, they had a better

understanding of how much time was needed to do their assignments and study for exams, and

they were more aware of the resources that were available to them if they needed help with

something. This sentiment was repeated by many students "I think [university] has gotten easier.

Once you find your groove and understand the day to day on goings of university, you get the

hang of it pretty quick" and "[I am] more experienced, know how to study and manage [my] time

better. [I] prioritized school and grades over other things. I made an effort to get to know other

students and now have friends in all my classes."

Seventy-seven students said that even though the courses were more difficult, the upper

year courses were more specific to their majors so they were more interested in the courses

which made it easier to attend and pay attention in class. As this student put it "upper year

courses are so much better. They are more specific and there is more time to ask questions and

pursue your interests within that course." Thirty-five students expressed their belief that it was

easier to make friends in upper years because of the shared interests and smaller class sizes.

Thirty-three students said they enjoyed the upper year classes because they made an effort to get

to know their professors since they were not intimidated by them as they had been in first-year.

As this student put it "A lot of second year courses are smaller in size and so I have more

opportunities speaking to my professor on a one to one basis." A fourth year student said

"because class sizes are smaller, it's easier to get to know instructors" and "as the years

progressed classes have become smaller. I am more confident with myself to speak in class,

made more friends due to the ability to have a dialogue with the smaller classes and thus got to

know people much quicker and easier." And another student reiterated that "compared to the

first year I have definitely more interaction with the profs. Also more respect and recognition

from profs but that also comes with higher expectations of you. Also, profs seem to want you to

succeed now, as compared to first-year when you were expected to keep up or fail."

Twenty-six students did not notice any difference between their first-year courses and

their upper year courses. As one student put it "I don't think it changed much. Maybe there is

more opportunity for my own thoughts going into assignments but it is still the same." Or as this

student said "My experience has not changed, if anything it has just been the same if not worse.

Instructors are not organized at all, they don't seem like they know what they are teaching, the

lectures are all over the place, not following along with the textbook nor do their tests/exams

relate to what they teach in their lectures."

It was not surprising that upper-year students were more comfortable with the university

environment and enjoyed their classes more. The first-year of university is always the hardest

because everything is new. Once students know the routine of courses, instructor expectations,

and services available to them it makes it much easier for them to get the help that they require in

order to be successful. It makes sense that upper-year students find that they begin to enjoy going to university because they now feel like they belong. Many of the students referenced the fact that first-year is really hard because they are not only trying to find classes, they are trying to figure out how the university works, they are intimidated by their instructors due to prior understandings about the role of professors that may not be true, they feel alone without friends for the first time in years, and they do not have the support of teachers who know them. This is similar to how all of us feel when we are put in positions that are outside our realm of experience. It is the fear of the unknown that can cause difficulties and this appears to be the case for the first-year students who participated in this study.

Did you think of Leaving University after First-Year and Why?

Seventy-four percent said no, they never thought of leaving while 27% said they had thought of leaving university after their first year.

Question seventeen asked students why they thought of leaving university. The reasons were very personal for the most part with some students saying that they felt too lonely and isolated at university because it was hard to make friends. A few said they didn't feel like they belonged, and they felt they got no support from their professors. One student said "I am thinking about it after my second year. Not because I would like it to happen but I don't feel any support from the professors." Another student expressed the same sentiment "I am thinking of leaving because I don't fit in with university [and] being on your own instead of teachers helping you all the time." Some students also said they did not feel prepared for university study, and some said they did not find what they were taking useful "It was hard and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't think that continuing with my education would be helpful." Several students' expressed this opinion "Maybe it's just not for me after all if I'm struggling

this much in only the first-year then continuing on might be a waste of time if I can't do it." And

many students found "The stress of realizing that your public education years did not prepare

you for the university life. It was upsetting to see how far behind I am due to this failure [of]

public education." The four reasons that received the most comments included twenty-nine

students who said university was too expensive for them to continue, twenty-five who said it was

too stressful, twenty-one who said they were not doing well enough to continue, and twenty

students who did not feel that university was for them and they were going to try something

different like attending a community college such as Red River to learn a trade. One of the

students said "[university] seemed like a lot of work and a lot of money to continue in something

where I'm not even sure I'd be able to get a job. I still sometimes fancy the idea of going to Red

River or something, and learning a trade in two years and then being able to get a job in that field

straight away."

There are many reasons why students contemplate leaving university. One of the main

reasons provided by the students, as to why they wanted to drop out, is because they were not

doing well and saw it as a waste of money if they could not be successful. Another group of

students complained that their high schools did not prepare them for university study and

therefore they felt that they were being asked to do assignments or to know information that they

didn't know. This made it hard to keep up with their classes and the expectations of their

instructors which led to a great deal of stress. Many students said they could not afford to go to

university as the cost of university meant that they had to work long hours to be able to afford

not only university tuition and books but also food and shelter. There were a number of students

who said they had dropped out of university, at least once, but had come back because they

wanted a better life than a minimum wage job could afford them.

Reasons why students decided to stay at university?

Two hundred and thirteen said that they were motivated to continue going to university because they had a goal to get a degree and they felt that attending university would help them achieve that goal. As one student said "The fact that I require a university education to do the job that I want to do has propelled me forward in my university education." They also said that they enjoyed learning so that is why they would not want to leave the university. As one student put it "I really love school" and "I just love learning and want to go onto further education." Fifty students said that by the end of first-year they had found support from their instructors and were more comfortable asking for help which made their experience more enjoyable. One of the students summed it up by saying "I figured [university out] after my first-year. I learned more about what's expected in university and it for sure made my second year a lot easier." Forty-six students said that leaving was not an option due to parental pressure and they got a lot of support from their parents which helped them continue. This comment is similar to what other students also said "my motivation is my family and friends, they support and believe in me to finish university." Twenty-two students said they would not leave because they had made friends in their classes and those friends were going to be taking some of the same classes as they were so it wouldn't be as lonely. Twenty-six said they did not want to admit defeat by dropping out so they were going to persevere because they did not want to be seen as a failure. As one student put it "Well, I don't really like disappointing my family, but not only that I don't want to disappoint myself. I felt if I ever quit I would not be able to forgive myself for giving up a great opportunity." Fourteen students said they were doing well so there was no need to drop out. As one student put it "I received high marks, which maintained my confidence and enjoyment of classes."

One of the students said the following which was a common theme in why students did not leave university "When push comes to shove I do not leave when the going gets tough. Just because this faculty gave up on being excellent doesn't mean I should give up. I will remain to be the person I sought to be. I will not leave until my mission is complete and that I fulfilled my ambition. You people cannot scare me that easily. I am tougher than you think." It is unsettling to read that students think that the university institution is working to make them fail.

Conclusion

After reading through the student surveys it became clear that the majority of the students, who responded to the survey, regard the university institution as an uncaring bureaucracy complete with its own set of rules in terms of authority, responsibility, and communication. The problem for students, in such an organization, is that because of the many layers of top-down management employed by administrators students feel like they are the bottom layer with no say in what happens at the university. The difficulty with the university using a business model is that this neglects the consumers, who are the students, and instead emphasizes and isolates those in positions of authority from the student body. Students complain that they are not at liberty to argue with how the university is run, cannot complain about the people who provide services to them, and in essence they are paying but have no say in where the money goes or how it is spent. The students are expected to adhere to a set of rules but they are often not privy to what those rules are, where to find them, and how to follow them. As a result, the students are not happy with their role in the university which leads to a sense of dissatisfaction with the whole institution. In a business, the employees get paid a salary and that is compensation for following the rules. However, in a university the students pay as clients, and

are not paid as employees; they feel that they are being ignored when they have justifiable

questions or concerns.

It is the students' perception that the university bureaucrats do not want them to succeed

and instead put up barriers to their success.   Some of the things they experienced that lead them

to this conclusion were professors who didn't care if they passed or failed courses, advisors who

did not advise and instead treated students like they were bothering them for asking questions,

discovering there were rules about things like having to take required courses that did not count

toward their degree after they had registered, finding out they were responsible for hidden costs

that they did not anticipate when budgeting such as the UPass (bus pass required by all students),

the gym fee, lab fees, and student fees.

The students spoke of coming to university with high expectations of what going to

university would be like. They expected that they would be able to enter into an academic

discourse where their opinions would be valued. Instead they faced days of attending lectures

but not speaking to anyone in class, of not being able to ask questions of their instructors, not

being able to make friends, and of walking around aimlessly between classes. These issues lead

to a feeling of disconnect from the university itself. The students complained that they felt like

strangers and intruders in an institution that appeared to exist solely for the purpose of taking

their money without any concrete benefits. They were also discouraged that no one listened to

their concerns about the support they required in order to be successful. This sense of not

belonging created many difficulties for the students independent of their academics.

It is important to remember that most first-year students come to universities direct from

high school where they did not have to make many decisions and the decisions they had were

limited. Many of the students had been very successful in high school and expected the same

level of work, the same amount of time devoted to assignments, and the same level of

camaraderie from friends. They expected that their professors would get to know them and that

they would be welcomed into the new learning environment. They were, for the most part, eager

to begin the next stage of their lives. Then reality set in where none of these expectations were

being met.

One of the issues the students referenced was that their need for information has to be balanced

with the amount of information available. When the students discussed their need for more

ongoing support from members of the university this did not mean that they wanted more

paperwork. The amount of information available online or in paper format such as posters,

postcards, handouts, leaflets, etc. was overwhelming for the students. Most students did not read

the information because there was too much of it available. As a result, they did not pay

attention to what was provided as they did not want to bother sifting through that much

information day after day. What the respondents said they wanted is less and more focused

information that reflects their needs. For example, they want to hear about preparing for exam

workshops the week before exams start and about note-taking workshops after their midterms

once they realize that the types of notes they are taking in their classes is not working for them.

Universities need to provide a level of support for first-year students to help them feel

like they belong in their new educational institution. We cannot expect first-year students to

know everything they need to know about being university students in two short months. In June

they are high school students with all of the supports in place and two months later they are

university students with no obvious or practical supports available. It is not reasonable for

university institutions to expect first-year students to be able to navigate the new system without

providing the assistance that students say they want and need. Universities often take for granted

that students can figure things out on their own but the students said they can't, not without a lot

of ongoing support provided. The students also requested that some workshops be tailored just

for first-year students. Once students reached their second year they reported that things got

easier because they had figured out the system. However, these same students emphasized that

their first-year of university was very difficult for them because they felt like they didn't know

anything which led to a lack of self-esteem. This lack of confidence stopped them from seeking

help.

Students also expressed their wish that their first-year instructors would be more patient

with their questions, forgive their lateness getting to class at the beginning of term, and be more

tolerant with their seeming lack of understanding. It is all so new to them and for instructors it is

just another day. Students deserve respect and understanding for the difficulties that they are

encountering on a daily basis and instructors have to be willing to offer that understanding rather

than condemning them for trying to fit in when they don't know how to fit in. The experiences

they have in each individual classroom, and the university at large, can make the difference

between successfully completing their courses or failing and dropping out.

Recommendations

When reading over the transcripts where students discussed some of the issues that they

faced when they began their first-year of university, the majority of the students identified these

six issues as the ones that they deemed the most significant and the ones that had the most impact

on their success. Their comments form the basis for the recommendations made in this report.

1. **Sense of Belonging –** this was a topic that was mentioned over and over by the students.

   When students first come to university, for the most part, they are alone and this sense of

   loneliness permeates their first-year experience. The students wished there were more

opportunities to get together with other first-year students such as during orientation week or maybe once a month. These gatherings would be strictly for first-year students.

Classroom for Homework and Studying – The students felt it would be beneficial for the university to designate certain classrooms in each building that could be used by first-year students as a place to study and meet other first-year students. These rooms could change depending on what was available but the first-year students expressed a need to have some place to go when they were not in class. Without a designated place they were forced to find their own spot such as sitting on stairways or on hallway floors. This sense of disconnect between what they needed and what was offered led to them not feeling a part of the university.

1. **Accessing Information.** Most universities have extensive web-based information available to students on their websites. The difficulty for students is that they do not know where to access the information. It is often taken for granted that because students use their computers everyday that they are technologically savvy. That is a misconception. Students do not know how to navigate the university websites. This finding was supported by the number of students who said they wished there was more information on things like university clubs, or they wanted information that showed them how to register, what the voluntary withdrawal policy meant, how to log onto the library website etc. This information is readily available on the university website but students did now know where to look for help.

Email - In addition, students are not used to sending and receiving emails from their educational institutions and so do not think to check their university email accounts on a regular basis. It is a matter of habit once they get used to it but those habits have to be a

part of their everyday lives and for many students that is not what they do on a daily basis. As a result, students complained of missing information that their instructors sent to the class, and in one case a student missed a midterm because the date had been changed and the professor had emailed the class but that student did not read the email until after the midterm had come and gone. Instructors should remind students to always check their emails and this reminder should be included on the course syllabi. It is a small thing but it is important.

2. **More Guidance not less –** It is important to remember that first-year students just left a safe place, high school, where most of the decisions were made for them. Now, they are expected to make all of their own decisions without any guidance. The students who fare better at university are the ones who have an extensive system of support in place. They have older siblings, supportive parents, family members, and friends who can help them navigate the bewildering chaos that comes with trying to decide which classes to take. It is unreasonable to expect these students to have matured in two short months when they have been used to someone else making the decisions for them their entire school life. It would be beneficial if first-year students had dedicated advisors who could assist them and answer their questions even if it was through email.

   Advisors – First-year students expect a lot from their advisors and they often felt let down when they were not able to get the information they needed to be able to make informed choices about their classes. The students said they wanted to have someone explain to them what their class choices were in terms of which classes were available and to tell them which classes were mandatory.

Registration Process - The registration process was one area that they singled out as being particularly confusing. Students' lack of understanding on how to register for their courses, and what to register for, caused many of them problems at the beginning of term. One issue that arose, for many students, was finding out after the class began that they also needed to be registered in a lab section and they were not aware of that during the registration period. They assumed that they would be put into a lab section when they registered for the course.   In addition, the students reported that they did not know what waitlists meant and how to register for a waitlist, and they were not aware of what their obligations were with being on a waitlist and attending class.

The students suggested that it would have been helpful if there were dedicated registration workshops for first-year students that were held at the university, during the summer, where they could speak to advisors face to face before registering. They requested that those advisors be patient with them and not dismissive or rude. It was the perception of the students that many advisors, they spoke to, could have been more polite when dealing with them. They wondered if it was too much to ask the advisors to remember that first-year students did not have any experience with registering at a university and that the questions they were asking were important to them.

First-Year Tutoring – Students said it would be helpful if the tutoring lab had a designated time just for first-year students. They stated that they were uncomfortable asking for help, especially if they had been successful in high school, and they were intimidated with having to ask for help when there were upper year students around who might judge them. They also would appreciate having workshops around midterm and final exam time where they could go to learn how to study. Again, there are typically

workshops available to learn note-taking skills, study skills, and how to manage their time but they are not useful if the students do not know how to access them or do not understand that the services are available to all students.

3. **Listen to Students' Concerns**

Students expressed the need for those in a position of authority to listen to some of their needs and concerns. As one student said "I've learned that our university has some awful profs. Take the students voices more seriously rather that those evaluations that are conducted at the end of the term. When we come forward and want to speak with Deans and individuals in charge: LISTEN TO US. Yes, the profs may look good on paper, but we are the ones spending hours and months with them. Don't you think WE know best? Stop belittling us." And one student said "I would like to thank you for putting together this survey and giving us students a chance to voice our needs and concerns." The recommendation is that students be given a forum to voice their concerns with the university institution and that their concerns be taken seriously.

4. **Extended Services for Evening Students**

A student who only attends in the evening made the following comment "I've found it extremely hard to utilize the university's services. Many of the services offered like the info booth, student central, and academic advising are only available during regular business hours. This disadvantages those who are working full time and are taking courses in the evening in order to complete their degrees. Having extended hours would make it possible for all students to be able to utilize the services offered." It is important that universities realize that not all students are on campus during the day. Some students also found it difficult to get a student card because the place to obtain a student card is

only open during the day. All students should have access to the same services and universities should make it a priority to include services for all students.

5. **Signage** – a) it is difficult enough to navigate a new environment but universities, in general, make it more difficult by not providing signage for things like washrooms. This is a basic need of students, and staff, and finding where washrooms are located can be difficult. The recommendation is that signs be hung from the ceiling right by the doors to the washrooms.

   b) **Hallways and buildings** – First-year students are used to coming from buildings that are self-contained. They have never had to switch buildings for different classes. Most universities are spread over a large area with multiple buildings and confusing hallways. Students who found it difficult to locate their classrooms said they were made to feel like they were the minority and there was obviously something wrong with them if they couldn't even locate their own classrooms. A map on the university website is not sufficient for students to locate buildings. There should be clear signage pointing the way to the different buildings that make-up the campus. Similarly, once inside the buildings there should be clear signage telling students where to locate classrooms within the building.

   c) **First Week Help** – the students commented that it would be beneficial, at the beginning of term, if they had upper-year students, with easy to spot t-shirts, stationed at the entrances to the different buildings to help them find their classrooms especially the hard to find classrooms that are tucked away in obscure hallways. These upper-year students could also provide guidance as to where to locate things like students' services, the library, the computer lab, the gym, the bookstore etc.

These suggestions, offered by the students, are things that the university can work towards implementing in an effort to retain more of their first-year students. The importance of making students feel like they belong at university cannot be overstated as they want to be comfortable attending classes and speaking to their instructors and the support staff. The fact that I received over seven hundred responses, in a short time period, tells me that students want a forum for their voices to be heard. What they require is fundamentally what everyone requires which is a need to fit into a place where they spend the majority of their time. I don't think that is asking too much of their educational institutions.

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Appendix 1 Survey

Survey on First Year Experience

1. What year are you currently in at university?

   ☐ First Year
   ☐ Second Year
   ☐ Third Year
   ☐ Fourth Year
   ☐ Fifth Year

2. How would you rate your first-year university experience?

   ☐ Great
   ☐ Good
   ☐ Okay
   ☐ Poor

3. Explain your answer.

4. Why did you decide to go to university?

5. Was it as you expected?
   ☐ As expected
   ☐ Not as expected

6. What were some of the things that you were expecting when you began university?

7. What were some of the things that happened, that you did not expect at university?

8. What are some of the things you worry about at university? Check all that apply.

☐ Grades
☐ Assignments
☐ Paying for courses
☐ Paying for textbooks
☐ Covering rent
☐ Buying Food
☐ Making Friends
☐ Feeling Isolated
☐ Level of Independence Required
☐ Time-Management
☐ Trying to determine instructor expectations
☐ Being the only one who does not understand what to do in a course
☐ Balancing work load with my other commitments (e.g., work, family, friends).
☐ Writing Skills
☐ Difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching
☐ Feeling underprepared for university study
☐ Fear of failure
☐ Not doing as well as expected
☐ Finding time to study
☐ Being able to understand the academic language used at university
☐ Not having the computer skills necessary to navigate the university online platforms such as Nexus, Web Adviser, Library
☐ Other – please explain

9. How do you cope with your stress? Check all that apply.
☐ Talk to family or friends
☐ Speak to a Student Advisor
☐ Speak to Instructors
☐ Go and see a counsellor
☐ Alcohol
☐ Drugs
☐ Exercise
☐ Support Group
☐ Skip classes
☐ Listen to Music
☐ Meditate
☐ Other – please explain

10. How did you choose your courses for first-year university?
    - ☐ My friend was taking the course
    - ☐ Recommended by a friend or family member
    - ☐ Needed for my major
    - ☐ Spoke to an advisor who recommended it
    - ☐ Other - please explain

11. Did you drop any courses your first-year?

    Yes   No

12. If you dropped a course, why did you?
    - ☐ Did not drop a course.
    - ☐ It was too hard.
    - ☐ My marks were too low.
    - ☐ No interest
    - ☐ Did not like the instructor
    - ☐ Other - please explain

13. Did you have any issues during your first year? Please explain in detail.

14. What would have made your first-year experience more successful? Explain your answer.

15. If you are in second, third, or fourth year, how has your experience with upper year courses changed, if it has, from your experience in first year?

16. I am thinking of/thought of leaving university after my first year. Yes   No

17. If you answered yes, why are you thinking of leaving or why did you think of leaving?

18. If you answered no, what are some of the factors, that you can identify, that led to you completing your first year successfully, or will lead to your successfully completing your first year of university?