



NATIONAL USA SURVEY OF STUDENT RECRUITMENT, SATISFACTION & RETENTION

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Summary

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In today's competitive higher education sector, students are now dynamic consumers who take a very active role in their education.

The National Students' Outlook (NSO) Pilot Study, conducted in Spring 2003 in the USA, was designed to provide administrators with vital data regarding student recruitment, satisfaction, and retention.

The results of the pilot study, which included responses from over two thousand students at five different institutions, revealed that academics, location of college, and college reputation had significant roles in a student's final selection of a college¹.

The study also indicated that the majority of students were satisfied as students at their institution. However, as uncovered in the study, satisfaction does not necessarily equate to retention.

Based on the NSO study*, this article provides detailed data regarding student recruitment, satisfaction and retention, as well as recommendations on how to maximize survey research to learn more about student populations.

*See www.nationalstudentsoutlook.com

Introduction

Today, students entering higher education are dynamic consumers taking an active role in their education. These students search selectively for colleges and universities that best meet their needs and professional aspirations.

Moreover, many of these students continue searching for the optimum educational experience even after matriculating to college with nearly a third of all college students (23% of four year college students; 42% of two-year college students) transferring to different institutions before earning their degrees.

The number of students enrolling in higher education in the United States is projected to reach a new high each year from 2003 to 2012.

To successfully recruit in this growing and increasingly competitive student market, many administrators are now using research, such as the National Students' Outlook (NSO) Study, to develop new strategies for recruitment, measuring satisfaction and increasing retention.

In Spring 2003, Equation Research conducted a national pilot study in the United States: the National Students' Outlook (NSO) Study for Four-Year Colleges & Universitiesⁱⁱ. The purpose of the study was to provide administrators with data regarding students' expectations, needs, perceptions, attitudes, satisfaction, institutional climate, and recommendations to maximize the overall undergraduate educational experience.

Furthermore, the study was designed to provide administrators with immediate institutional and national data in an easy-to-read format so that critical decisions could be guided by current information reflecting students' attitudes and opinions. Five higher education institutions participated in the pilot study, including College of Charleston, Fisk University, Howard University, Ripon College, and The George Washington University. A total of 2,440 students completed the online survey.

Highlights from the final report are broken down into three key areas:

- I. Student Recruitment;
- II. Student Satisfaction; and
- III. Student Retention.

I. Student Recruitment

In the United States, there are over 1,400 accredited four-year colleges and universities to which students can apply. To succeed in this competitive arena, colleges now invest large amounts of money and time into student recruitment. So what are students looking for when they apply to college? The NSO study looked at two measures for recruitment:

- 1) factors of importance related to a student's overall college experience, and
- 2) the top ten reasons for a student deciding to attend a particular college.

In looking at these two measures, academics, location of college, and college reputation had significant roles in a student's final selection of a college.

A six-point Likert scale was used to identify factors of importance related to a student's overall college experience. The results of the study indicated that the majority of the students considered quality of instruction, courses offered, and

academic support as the most influential factors in their decision to attend a college. The top box percentages (ie., the cumulative percentage of respondents who selected *Very Important* and *Important*) revealed that the top fifteen most important factors for students related to their overall college experience included:

- 1) Quality of instruction in selected major(s) (98%)
- 2) Availability of offered courses (97%)
- 3) Variety of courses offered (97%)
- 4) Internet connection and speed (95%)
- 5) Academic support from faculty (95%)
- 6) Overall academic challenge of courses in major(s) (94%)
- 7) Overall accessibility of teaching staff outside of the classroom (93%)
- 8) Maintenance of academic buildings, classrooms, labs (93%)
- 9) Maintenance of residence halls/dormitories (93%)
- 10) Quality of academic advising in selected major(s) (93%)
- 11) Quality of course materials (92%)
- 12) Library services (92%)
- 13) Quality of instruction in introductory courses (92%)
- 14) Accessibility of advisor in selected major(s) (91%)
- 15) Computers available for students throughout campus (91%)

The NSO study also asked students to select their top ten (10) reasons out a list of 48 for deciding to attend their particular college. The results indicated that location of the college was the most significant factor followed by academic reputation and college reputation. As reported in the study, the top ten (10) reasons for students deciding to attend their college included:

- 1) Location of college (city, urban, suburban) (70%)
- 2) Academic reputation (63%)
- 3) College reputation (56%)
- 4) Availability of financial aid or scholarship (50%)
- 5) Faculty to student ratio (class size) (50%)
- 6) Size of undergraduate population (48%)
- 7) Campus social life (42%)
- 8) Friendliness of people on campus (36%)
- 9) College's history and traditions (35%)
- 10) Quality of courses offered (33%)

II. Student Satisfaction

The majority of students indicated on the NSO survey that they were satisfied (55%) and very satisfied (27%) as students at their college. Furthermore, 82% of the students stated that they would recommend their college to prospective students. Student satisfaction was measured through two protocols:

- 1) using a key driver analysis to identify the top ten (10) most critical factorsⁱⁱⁱ impacting overall student satisfaction, and
- 2) using a six-point Likert scale to measure satisfaction across multiple factors.

Both measures revealed that students were particularly satisfied with their campuses, courses, and quality of instruction.

The key driver analysis identified the top ten (10) most critical factors impacting overall student satisfaction as the following:

- 1) Attractiveness of campus
- 2) Variety of courses offered
- 3) Academic quality of students at the college
- 4) Quality of instruction in selected major(s)
- 5) Quality of instruction in introductory courses
- 6) Academic support from faculty
- 7) Course registration process
- 8) Dining services
- 9) College/student orientation program
- 10) Academic support from administrators (e.g., department chairs, assistant/associate deans, deans)

Top box percentages showed that the top fifteen factors in which students were most satisfied related to their overall college experience included:

- 1) Attractiveness of campus (84%)
- 2) Overall academic challenge of courses in major(s) (82%)
- 3) Maintenance of the grounds (landscape, cleanliness) (82%)
- 4) Overall accessibility of teaching staff outside of the classroom (80%)
- 5) Faculty to student ratio (class size) (79%)
- 6) Quality of instruction in selected major(s) (76%)
- 7) Online library services (75%)
- 8) Library hours (74%)
- 9) Quality of instruction in introductory courses (73%)
- 10) College website (73%)
- 11) Library services (71%)
- 12) E-mail services (71%)
- 13) Quality of course materials (70%)
- 14) Academic support from faculty (69%)
- 15) Internet connection (speed) (70%)

Student satisfaction was high across all class levels. Top box percentages showed little variation in satisfaction between freshmen 80%, sophomores 82%, juniors 83%, and seniors 85%. Additionally, top box percentages revealed that males (82%) and females (82%) were equally satisfied with their educational experience.

III. Student Retention

Across the United States, many colleges are successful at recruiting students. However, often the difficulty is how to retain students. Although students may be satisfied at their college, this does not guarantee that students will not transfer. For example, the NSO study revealed that 82% of the students were satisfied and very satisfied as students at their college, yet 42% of the students reported they had "considered transferring" to a different college. Of the 1,016 students who had "considered transferring", 12% actually planned to transfer to another college while 31% said they still were not sure whether they would transfer in the future. According to the NSO study, the top 5 reasons why students had "considered transferring" to another college included:

- 1) Unsatisfactory social atmosphere (43%)
- 2) Limited financial aid support (32%)
- 3) Want to be closer to home (25%)
- 4) Difficulty getting into classes (20%)
- 5) Lack of academic challenge (18%)

In further examining the data, one quarter to over one third of the students stated they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the accessibility of their advisor prior to deciding upon a major(s) (17% dissatisfied/8% very dissatisfied), the quality of academic advising prior to deciding upon a major(s) (19% dissatisfied/10% very dissatisfied), and the availability of offered courses (28% dissatisfied/8% very dissatisfied). Forty percent and more of the students also showed their dissatisfaction with information about off-campus student housing (27% dissatisfied/13% very dissatisfied), the quality of food served at dining facilities (26% dissatisfied/18% very dissatisfied), and the availability of parking (26% dissatisfied/44% very dissatisfied).

Summary

Survey research provides an excellent benchmarking opportunity to identify strengths and weakness at a higher education institution. The gathered data allows administrators to plan more effectively and also involve students in the strategic planning process. If benchmarking assessments are not conducted, changes may be made to areas in which students are currently satisfied and areas that need improvement may go overlooked

Although surveys provide substantial quantitative data, it is highly recommended that administrators conduct student focus groups as follow-up research to learn more about select responses. For example, with regards to students who “considered transferring”, three key factors that should be further examined following the NSO survey include 1) unsatisfactory social atmosphere, 2) difficulty getting into classes, and 3) lack of academic challenge. Through focus groups, administrators can better identify what students mean by unsatisfactory social atmosphere (e.g., not enough events, too few organizations, limited campus activities, etc.), difficulty getting into classes (e.g., process for registration, courses fill too quickly, limited waiting lists, students can register for an unlimited number of courses, etc.), and lack of academic challenge (e.g., weak course materials, too few assignments, unstructured curriculum, etc.). The information garnered from these focus groups provides rich data for the administration and enables the institution to better meet the needs of the students.

Student recruitment, satisfaction, and retention are key variables that affect all higher education institutions. Through survey research, such as the NSO study, administrators can learn more about their study body as well as compare their data nationally. Overall, the results of the NSO study indicated that the students attending the five participating colleges and universities were satisfied with their college experience. The majority of the students stated that they would give their college an A = Excellent (35%) or a B = Good (50%) if they were asked to grade their college on the education that they had received thus far. Additionally, 70% of the students stated that their college was a good financial value for the education that students receive. Nevertheless, administrators beware: although students may be satisfied, they are still active consumers.

Endnotes

ⁱ The term *college* has been used throughout to represent colleges and universities.

ⁱⁱ To learn more about the National Students’ Outlook Study, see www.nationalstudentsoutlook.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Key driver analysis employs regression analysis to determine the most significant drivers or factors impacting on overall student satisfaction.