

Are Today's Students Different?

I guess that's for you to decide based on your teaching experience to date, but this article lists demographic characteristics of today's students, from Canadian sources, that have significance for teaching and learning. It also presents American research findings on student attitudes and values with respect to teaching and learning, balanced by observations from UNB instructors.

Student Demographic Characteristics that Impact Teaching and Learning

Highlights:

- The female/male mix at UNBF is far closer to 50-50 than for peer universities, which have a much higher proportion of females.
- The undergraduate student body is less diverse than the national average, but we have more Francophone students.
- UNB has fewer international students than do peer institutions. And few Canadian students from provinces outside the Maritimes.
- The average age of students rises each year, and more have adult responsibilities such as child rearing.
- Eight percent of students have a disability, with ADHD, mental health and learning disabilities being the most common. Less than half register with the Student Disability Centre.
- Sixty percent of undergraduates work as well as study, but only 36% of first year students do so.
- Almost half of our students come from small towns or rural areas (more than double our peer universities) but almost 20% come from large urban areas.
- The parents of half of undergraduates did not attend university.

Details:

According to Prairie Research Associates' *Canadian University Survey Consortium 2011 Undergraduate University Student Survey*, the typical UNBF undergraduate student is a 23-year-old, single, English-speaking female. At UNBF, female students outnumber men significantly (57% to 43%) amongst survey respondents, but far less so than the Canadian average of about 66% F to 33% M¹. This balance varies widely in some faculties such as Engineering and Nursing. One student in three is 22 years old or older, the same as the average for Canadian universities of our size.

Almost half of all students are single, and 41% are in a non-marital relationship, up slightly from the Canadian average for universities our size. Eleven percent of UNBF students are married or living common-law. Eight percent of all students have one child or more.

English is the first language of more than 87% of UNBF students, up significantly from the Canadian average of 72%. French is the first language of five percent, more than double the overall Canadian average.

Eight percent of students' first language is other than English or French, dramatically less than the 27% average for universities of our size (our percentage is closer to that of universities much smaller or much larger than ours).

Eight percent say they are disabled, which is roughly the same in all Canadian universities. Less than half that percentage register with the UNBF Student Accessibility Centre. The most common disabilities amongst those registered with the UNBF Student Accessibility Centre are ADHD, mental health, and learning disabilities (see UNB Student Accessibility Centre infographic link at http://www.unb.ca/fredericton/cetl/tls/resources/accessible_learning/index.html)

Self-identified visible minority students account for 11% of UNBF students, dramatically less than 40% in our peer universities. The most common were Black, Chinese, Arab, South Asian, and Southeast Asian, according to UNB's NSSE results in 2011, the same year as the Prairie Associates survey. These were the most common in NSSE's 2012 survey as well, but not in the same order.

Four percent of our undergraduate student body are international students, half of the percentage of our peer institutions. Four percent of all students are Aboriginal, exactly the same as our peers.

Sixty percent of undergraduate students have decided on a specific career field, a choice that typically does not change throughout their undergraduate experience.

Sixty percent work while enrolled in undergraduate studies, averaging about 18 hours paid work per week. This matches the rate at peer institutions. Seventeen percent of UNBF students work full time (more than 30 hours per week), significantly more than at peer universities. UNBF first year students buck the national trend in that 64% of its first year students do not work off campus (NSSE 2012).

Thirty percent of those who work say their employment affects their studies positively (much higher percentage of those who work on campus say this). Thirty-three percent report that employment negatively affects their studies, especially amongst those who work 20 hours per week or more while attending university full-time. Part-time UNBF students are more likely to work (81%) than full-time students (53%). When academic work and employment are combined, the average student spends 41 hours per week on her or his combined pursuits.

About half of students live independently, typically in rented accommodations (33%) or on-campus (16%). About 40% of students live with their parents or other family members.

Almost half of UNBF students (48%) live in off-campus housing, much higher than the 35% of students at peer institutions. Far fewer UNBF students live with parents or other relatives (26%) than peer universities (46%). Eighteen percent of our students live on campus, more than their peers at other

institutions (11%). Seven percent of both groups own their own homes, a reflection of the upward shift in the average age of undergraduate students.

Predictably, a much larger proportion of UNBF students (45%) come from rural or small town communities (combining farm and under 10,000) than our peer universities (22%). However, 18% come from cities of 100,000 or more.

More than half of UNBF students are first generation university attenders, which means they come without having been prepared for the experience by their parents, so they will be figuring out on their own and with peers how best to behave academically and otherwise. Example of students in large class who would not do peer discussion, even though they knew their neighbours.

Student Attitudes and Values Relevant to Teaching and Learning

The following picture of typical undergraduate student behaviour is taken from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), an American organization. The Canadian equivalent, CACUSS (Canadian Association of Colleges and Universities Student Services) does not have similar published data on Canadian students. Interspersed with the US findings are observations from UNBF instructors about UNBF students with respect to the findings.

Students are Goal-Oriented and Self-Confident but Expect Quick Success

Today's students are driven. They pressure themselves to succeed, but success must be immediate. Long term success comes from the accumulation of short-term successes—there is little sense of struggling with complexity for the sake of longer term deeper understanding and ability; little “getting outside your comfort zone.” They are confident and motivated, but underestimate and resist the amount of effort required to reach their goals. They expect high grades for minimal effort and seem uninterested in the learning process. They have a false sense of achievement due to grade inflation, and react negatively if their school experience does not conform to their expectations. This works against the deep learning that comes from trying things and making mistakes, and they have been protected from failure throughout their schooling.

They tend not to spend enough time on any task, especially studying (UNBF students spend 22.2 hrs. per week for all courses, or just under 4½ hours per course per week), higher than students at our peer universities (17.9 or ~3½ per course). According to NSSE, over 90% of UNBF professors expect full-time undergraduates to do 15-20 hours or more of course study and preparation per week, but only 49% of UNBF undergraduates report doing so.

Igor Mastikhin, a UNB Physics professor, observes that many students are great at hoarding information (pretty much like squirrels are good at hoarding acorns) but not so good at analyzing, organizing and using it effectively to apply concepts. It's as if they're convinced that there is no need to generate new knowledge, because all possible knowledge has been already created, and all you need to do is just look it up on Internet (popular culture, schools and the media constantly reinforce this). They can categorize but not process information. What they really need is to learn how to make logical connections between

various bits of data and come up with new, previously non-existent results. To change themselves from "knowledge hoarders" to "knowledge generators" - this is a stretch for many.

Students are Stressed

Students' lives are tightly scheduled. Although goal oriented, they lack the skills to manage time that may prevent burnout, contributing to being "stressed out." Thirty-six percent of female students and 45% of males report being sufficiently depressed as to make it difficult to function (Junco, 139).

Students stress over grades and are quick and demanding to challenge grades if they are not high enough. They want objective evaluation and want to know exactly what they have to do to get an A. They want it all written down. Their parents sometimes do the asking and demanding for them, suggesting that the instructor has been mistaken in their evaluation.

Students Expect Technology

They expect technology to be incorporated into their classes and for instructors to be adept at using it. Students generally dislike completely online courses because of the lack of engagement and interaction (Junco, 147). They expect course materials to be available online, though. It can be helpful to use online components to create opportunities for faculty-student interaction, which is important to students. The following types of online interaction can help achieve that: chats, instructor and student introductions, discussions, online group work space (e.g., Desire2Learn Groups feature) and of course, email.

The Social Side of Learning

Today's students are used to working in groups all through school. They prefer social interaction in their learning. They value the development of good relationships with professors and peers. They prefer less lecturing and more discussions, group work and projects. Instructors can complement this through creating study groups, assigning learning partners. However, this does not always translate automatically into willingness to interact with other students in large classes (~100 and up), at least at UNB. Janice Lawrence, UNB Professor of Biology, relates the difficulty in getting her students in her large introductory class to participate in peer instruction (having students pair up and explain to each other their understanding of the topic at hand). Many students refuse to participate, even though she explains the benefits to students of peer instruction. In one case, a group of students knew each other, having attended the same high school and engaged in class discussion there. However, they were not comfortable doing it in the fish bowl of a large class.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning involves knowledge that is organized by the learner and obtained through direct participation or experience. Today's students have used computers throughout their schooling, and intuitively know how to solve technology problems. They rarely read instruction guides. They want to consult original sources and make their own conclusions rather than study the opinions/works of interpreters.

To complement this predisposition, Junco has an assignment in which he asks students to find “bogus” and “legitimate” research. Basic guidance is provided and then students search for articles and bring them to class for discussion. This has worked better than two or three sessions of explaining the differences among peer-reviewed journals, self-published research, and conjecture (Junco, 142).

Academic Integrity and Preparedness

Plagiarism is a much bigger issue now, because of the ease of copy-and-paste. Students may think it’s OK to use others’ words if they are credited. It is much easier nowadays to find and use other people’s papers.

Students spend more time “texting” or “instant messaging” each day than they spend studying. This has degraded their writing ability. Professors also find that students arrive at UNB less well prepared in Math and English than at any time before.

More Observations from UNB Experience

Ben Newling, UNB Professor of Physics, observes that in his years teaching (since 2002), he doesn’t discern generalizable trends. Every year students are different in different ways. There are too many variables at play to know if it’s instructor or student characteristics or those plus other factors. This year (2013), Ben has noticed his students have a stronger tendency to abbreviate terms in speaking and writing. For example, “moment of inertia” becomes “inertia” for them, without them realizing that all three words are significant, and the two terms denote completely different things.

Each year, Ben finds he needs to use a certain degree of flexibility in his teaching methods. This involves having the presentation of a number of things rehearsed (“in the bank,” so to speak), but then being flexible during class, refining the nuance of how the content is presented and applied in learning activities according to what students are like and interested in.

Teaching Tips

Junco offers the following teaching tips for today’s students:

- Explain your thinking, not just the answers.
- Laugh at your mistakes and use them as learning opportunities. Model error detection and problem solving.
- Say “we” and create a team atmosphere.
- Use personal anecdotes that are relevant to the subject.
- Use engaging nonverbal cues.
- Try to create a conversational atmosphere in which you are talking with, not to, students.
- Be enthusiastic about your subject.

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- Learn about your students. Find out if they are the first generation of their families to go to university. Personalize the course material, such as finding course concept examples from their experience. Convey a sense of shared ownership.
 - Provide experiential learning opportunities. They prefer to arrive at their own knowledge by interacting.
 - Use technology to enhance interaction and engagement, as opposed to presenting large volumes of content. Students have short attention spans. Teach how to find legitimate information sources.

¹. All UNB undergraduate students, all campuses, 2013 actual numbers, not survey respondents:

- 52% Female / 48% Male;

Note the marked difference between the Fredericton and Saint John campuses:

- UNBF Undergraduates: 49.7% Female / 50.3% Male
- UNB Saint John Undergraduates: 58.4% Female / 41.6% Male)

References

Junco, R. & Mastrodicasa, J. (2007). *Connecting to the net.generation: What higher education professionals need to know about today's students*. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), United States of America.

NSSE data for UNBF and UNB Saint John: contact David Kilfoil, Educational Analyst, at dkilfoil@unb.ca

Prairie Research Associates. Canadian University Survey Consortium UNB Student Survey Reports. Retrieved from <https://secure.unb.ca/admin/rpb/institutional-research/surveys/index.html>