Focus On Freshmen 2005

Fall is a time of renewal on college campuses. In contrast to its counterpart in nature, fall is the time when campuses across the country come to life, as a new class of students join the community of learners and the community readies itself for the new academic year. That’s not to say that academe’s winter season, running through the months of June to August, is completely quiet. UNCG has a very active summer community. However, like a tree that is missing many of its leaves, the campus in summer seems sadly incomplete.

Staff and faculty throughout the university use the comparative quiet of summer to regroup, retool, and prepare for the new life to return in the fall. Certainly the Division of Student Affairs is no exception. Our staff works throughout the summer to close out the old academic year and prepare for the new. We remain ever mindful of our continuing students who make up the majority of our community. In addition, summer term is a busy time for the Office of Student Affairs Research and Evaluation as we prepare for the New Student Survey.

Each year, the Office of Student Affairs Research and Evaluation collects and summarizes responses from roughly 2,000 first-time, first-year freshmen through our New Student Survey (Survey). In this issue of A Closer Look…., we begin by looking at this year’s Survey results. When possible, we also looked back to prior years’ Survey results to see how freshman perceptions, experiences, and needs have changed over time. In doing this, we discovered some remarkable trends, including indications that students’ perceptions of UNCG are changing. For example, the figure at the right documents the change in first-time, first-year freshmen perceptions of UNCG as an academic institution. Only 42% of our 2002 freshmen chose UNCG for its academic reputation. This year, 48% of freshmen reported choosing UNCG for its academic reputation.

Other findings over this four-year period, such as a 7% increase in the percent of freshmen planning to spend seven or more weekends on campus and a 4% increase in the number of freshmen planning on completing their degrees at UNCG, appear to indicate that student perceptions of UNCG are changing in a very positive direction. We encourage you to read on and discover many new and exciting things about our new freshmen.

Percent values are rounded and may not sum to 100%.

We make New Student Survey data available for institutional use and encourage you to use these data. Please contact Mark Davenport or Julie Malcolm in the Office of Student Affairs Research and Evaluation for more information about getting raw data for your academic area.

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College Preference

Each year for the past four years, we have asked incoming freshmen about their college preference. Specifically, we ask if UNCG was their institution of first choice and, if not, which institution was their first choice?

Figure 1 above shows the percent of freshmen that indicated UNCG was their college of first choice. On average over the past four years, more than half of our first-time, first-year freshmen preferred UNCG, over all other institutions. In Figure 2, UNCG as first choice is broken down by college. The percents for the Schools of Education (70%) and Music (71%) represent an increase of more than 10% over first choice response rates for 2003.

In addition, the Survey asked students to share what other institution they selected as their top choice if UNCG was not their first preference. The percent of students reporting that UNC-Chapel Hill (21%), NC State (14%), another UNC institution (26%), a private college within the state (19%) or a college in another state (20%) was their first choice has changed little over the past few years.

Entering College

Entering students often complete courses for college credit before starting at UNCG. About 21% of our Survey respondents reported having taken a course for credit prior to entering UNCG as traditional first-time, first-year freshmen. About 2% reported having taken a course at UNCG; 3% at another four-year institution. About 16% reported having taken a credit course at a two-year college.

The Survey asked students to share their primary reason for deciding to attend UNCG. The majority of students (77%) indicated that they needed a degree to pursue their career plans. This is a decrease from earlier survey results which hovered between 80% and 82% from 2002 to 2004. In 2005, 19% of our freshmen indicated that their primary reason for coming to UNCG was to enrich themselves compared to 14% in 2004.

A large majority of incoming freshmen report that they are planning to remain at UNCG until graduation. In 2005, 81% of freshmen indicated that they planned on staying at UNCG through graduation. This is an increase of 4% from 2002. In addition there have been decreases in the number of students who plan to “stop out”, or leave and return later to complete their degree, (2% in 2002 compared to 1% in 2005) as well as the number of students who plan to transfer because of their major (14% in 2002 compared to 11% in 2005).
Academic Preparation

First-time freshmen bring with them prior knowledge and experience tempered with certain expectations about attending college. They make choices about employment, hours needed for study, and what they expect to learn and experience. We asked Survey respondents several questions about their academic preparation and their study habits. We then asked them to reflect on what to expect during their first year at UNCG.

For the past two years, roughly 73% of Survey respondents reported studying outside of the classroom five or fewer hours during the average week as seniors in high school. Only about eight percent reported studying more than 10 hours during the average week.

Predictably, those students who reported studying more hours per week tended to agree that their study habits would help them succeed at UNCG (See figure 3).

Figure 3
I feel that the study habits I used in high school will help me to succeed at UNCG.

By contrast, 52% of the 2005 students indicated that they expected to study more than 10 hours in the average week during their first year at UNCG. This is actually a 17% increase compared to the same item from the 2004 Survey. New students were also asked if they felt that the knowledge they received in high school would prepare them for college-level work. Agreement with this statement has increased by 8%, from 43% in 2003 to 51% in 2005.

The Survey includes two items about students’ perceived academic strength and weakness. Since 2003, responses have not shown significant change, with about 30% reporting that math is their primary academic strength and 23% reporting that English is their primary strength. Interestingly, perceptions about writing as a primary strength have decreased from 14% in 2003 to 11% in 2005.

Forty-two percent of the students indicated that math was their primary academic weakness; 15% indicated that English was their primary weakness. These percentages are consistent with 2004 and 2003 results within a few percentage points. The percent reporting writing as their primary weakness dropped from 16% in 2003 and 2004 to 14% in 2005.

More than half of the students reported having taken precalculus or algebra 3 as their highest math course (58% in 2004 and 56% in 2005). Twenty-three percent of the students reported having taken an advanced placement math course.

Academic Experiences and Interests

Students were questioned about their use of library services during their senior year in high school. Nineteen percent reported that they didn’t use their high school library during their senior year, 38% used it occasionally, 11% used it often, 10% used some other library instead of their high school library, and 22% used both their high school library and other libraries.

When asked if they planned to become involved with a learning community while at UNCG, about 40% indicated that they would like to be involved, about 30% indicated that they would not. A consistent finding for the last three years is that 27% indicated that they did not know what a learning community was. This item did not appear on the 2002 Survey.

Across the last four years, students have become more optimistic about their ability to succeed academically at UNCG. In 2002, 44% of the students predicted that they would get a first year GPA of 3.5 or better. This dropped to 40% in 2003 but increased to 46% in 2004 and 47% in 2005. In the future we plan to examine how closely students’ perceptions match reality by comparing their predictions as found on the Survey with their actual first-year performance.

Unique to the 2005 survey was a question about plans to participate in an internship. Seventy-two percent of the respondents said they planned to complete an internship while at UNCG.

Finally, students were asked to report if they expected to be satisfied with the academic challenges presented by UNCG. In 2002, 93% believed they would always or usually be satisfied compared to 89% in 2005. Across all four years, fewer than 1% indicated that they rarely or never expect to be academically challenged at UNCG.
Residence Life

One of the most important concerns for incoming freshmen is the question of housing. Evidence from the survey clearly shows the growing dilemma in on-campus housing. In 2002, 84% of Survey respondents planned to live on campus. In 2005, that figure dropped to 81%. This does not necessarily indicate a drop in student interest in living on campus but, more likely, our inability to accommodate the growing number of students wanting on-campus housing. Compounding the problem is the finding that new freshmen intend to stay in the halls longer than their predecessors. In 2002, 36% of new, on-campus freshmen planned to live there for only one year. By 2005, that number dropped to 31%. However, the percentage of students who wish to live on campus for two years has increased from 29% in 2002 to 35% in 2005. In addition, the number of incoming freshmen who wish to live on campus three years has risen from 8% in 2002 to 10% in 2005.

For years, UNCG’s student activity planners have lamented the fact that many students leave campus on weekends, making many of their planning tasks very difficult. In 2002, about 65% of the Survey respondents thought they would spend more than 7 of the first 15 weekends on campus. By 2005, that number was 72%. In 2005, almost one-third of Freshmen expected to spend 13 or more semester weekends on campus.

Campus Involvement

Just as students bring experiences and expectations related to the academic portion of college life, they also bring with them the potential for leadership and campus involvement. As they begin their journey as college students, they make choices about their level of involvement in the college community and in the larger surrounding community through volunteer work and student leadership. In addition, they must learn how to utilize their personal strengths while addressing any areas in need of improvement.

The Survey asked students if they expected to be satisfied with the out-of-class opportunities provided by UNCG. For the past four years, roughly 89% of the respondents have indicated that they believed they would be satisfied with the social and out-of-class opportunities such as community service.

While still in high school, incoming freshmen found a variety of ways to participate in community service. Eighty-five percent of the 2005 Survey respondents indicated that they participated in some sort of community service activity in high school. For most of these students (37%) this activity was church-related; for about 30% this activity was on their own initiative. In contrast, only 10% of the 2005 respondents said that they did not participate in any form of community service in high school, up from 6% in 2002.

It is clear that freshmen come to UNCG with community service experience and this appears to carry over into their future service plans. In 2005, 79% of students agreed that they planned to be involved in volunteer or community service activities at UNCG compared to only 77% in 2002.

Students were also asked about their interest in developing leadership skills and becoming involved in leadership positions while at UNCG. Much to our surprise, the percent of students agreeing with the statement, ‘I would like to develop my leadership skills while at UNCG’ dropped from 80% in 2002 to 74% in 2005. The percent of students indicating that they wished to get involved in leadership positions while at UNCG remained steady at about 50% across the past four years.

In 2005, 79% of first-time first-year freshmen said that they planned to become involved in some form of community service while at UNCG.

Students were also questioned about their interpersonal skills. For the past three years, about 57% of Survey respondents have indicated that they feel comfortable expressing their opinions on controversial topics with people they don’t know well. The percent disagreeing has fluctuated from a low of 16% (2004) to a high of 19% (2005). New for the 2005 Survey was an item inquiring as to the student’s confidence that he/she can interact effectively with other students. Thirty-two percent strongly agreed while 52% agreed. Only about 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Finally, another new item for 2005 pertained to students’ expectations of UNCG’s role in helping them learn how to search for employment. Sixty-five percent of the respondents expected UNCG to teach them how to find a job while only 11% did not have such expectations.
**Computer Issues**

One area of great importance for this new class of college students is their access to computer technology. To this end, the *Survey* asked students to report what types of computers they have access to now and may have access to in the future.

Students were asked to report whether they would own a desktop, laptop, or both types of computers when entering UNCG. The number of students who own a desktop decreased from 48% in 2003 to 24% in 2005 while the number who own a laptop increased sharply from 30% in 2003 to 53% in 2005. The proportion of students with both types of computers increased from 6% in 2003 to 7% in 2005. Notable is the fact that the laptop ownership for the 2005 freshman class is about 60%.

If students responded that they did *not* bring a computer with them to UNCG, they were asked to report whether or not they would have off-campus access to one. The proportion who said *yes* has fluctuated over the past four years. However, the proportion indicating that they have *no* off-campus access to a computer has decreased from 54% in 2002 to 49% in 2005.

For the students without current computer access, the survey asked if they planned to purchase a computer for personal use. The number of students who responded *no* decreased sharply from 30% in 2002 to 14% in 2005. Students who planned to purchase a computer within the next year increased from 55% in 2002 to 73% in 2005.

**Putting It All Together**

For the incoming class of freshmen at UNCG this fall, life is taking each of them in new directions every day. They’re making academic choices, developing their leadership skills, and ensuring their voices are heard among the noise and excitement that is college life. These newest members of the academic community bring with them life experiences and expectations that will influence their success. They face the challenge of acclimating themselves to a new culture with an ever increasing amount of responsibility and choice.

Even though we all know students enter the university for personal advancement and future career options, it’s no surprise that campus life can take priority in a freshman’s mind. This year’s new underclassmen have predicted that they will spend more time on campus than their predecessors both in terms of living on campus and remaining on campus over semester weekends. This is exciting news for the university programmers as we can expect that our programs and services will enjoy greater participation. However, there is the added challenge of providing more and larger programs to serve more students.

Also of interest to UNCG faculty and staff are the collective academic experiences and expectations of freshmen. The study habits they developed in high school, the level of coursework they completed, even the amount of time they spent using the library will all have an impact on their level of success during this first formative year. Our 2005 freshman students reported spending fewer hours per week studying outside of the classroom during high school, using their school library more while not always utilizing other types of libraries, and pushing themselves to take more challenging math courses than their counterparts only three or four years ago. Our new freshmen report feeling confident that the study habits they developed in high school along with the coursework they took prepared them for the academic challenges to be found at UNCG, and more than 96% expect their hard work to pay dividends in the form of a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or greater.

An interesting trend that has also made itself evident concerns computer technology. Even though fewer students will bring their own desktop computer to UNCG, an ever increasing majority will bring along a laptop. In addition, fewer students are reporting a complete lack of computer experience prior to entering the university. Those students who enter without a computer aren’t going to wait long to remedy the situation. More students each year report their plans to purchase a computer within a year’s time and more report they will have off-campus access to computer technology.

One of the most important areas of the *Survey* focused on the students’ choice of UNCG. The number of incoming freshmen who wanted UNCG as their first choice has remained steady. In addition, more students are coming here because of the university’s academic reputation.

The university is drawing in a diverse population of students filled with excitement, dreams, and concerns. Students are coming here to challenge themselves and, in the process, will challenge this institution to meet their needs.

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If you would like more information about past or present *Survey* results, please visit the *Reports* page on our website at:

http://www.uncg.edu/saf/research/reports/

or, contact us at the *Office of Student Affairs Research and Evaluation*.