

A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

There is no more fundamental challenge facing universities today than undergraduate education. Dynamic social change, dramatic technological advances, rising costs, diminished state support, greater public accountability, and the acknowledged benefits of higher education combine to exert tremendous pressure to ensure the quality and relevancy of the Rutgers' undergraduate experience.

Since coming to Rutgers, I have worked with the entire community to make undergraduate education our highest priority. New academic and co-curricular programs, facilities both academic and recreational, re-engineered faculty reward systems, Learning Resource Centers, Teaching Excellence Centers, improved computer services, an enhanced library system, administrative reorganizations, attention to issues of diversity, strengthened support services through QCI, and strategic planning are just some of the more tangible expressions of this commitment to the improvement of undergraduate life.

Many measures chart our success: the high numbers of our graduates who successfully pursue advanced studies among AAU institutions, our recent Middle States reaccreditation, which included a focus on undergraduate education, college guide rankings that consistently place Rutgers among America's best public universities, student graduation rates, and others too numerous to mention. However, none or even all of these together are more important than the opinions of our own students.

That is why in 1992 I asked Vice President for Institutional Research and Planning, Dr. Christine M. Haska, to implement a massive but essential systematic program to elicit student feedback with the goal of further enhancing an already highly respected undergraduate program. Since that time, all levels of undergraduate students--newly enrolled, continuing students, students who leave the university, and students completing their studies--have been surveyed. Results of these surveys are contained in this compendium.

I am pleased to note that the survey results complement the other measures of our progress. More importantly, where comparative data exist, they reveal significant improvement over results obtained in 1992, the benchmark year, in areas where we have focused our efforts. While these survey results demonstrate our overall success, they also indicate areas where we face continuing challenge. I am confident that we will meet this challenge.

Francis L. Lawrence

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The university has many functions, but perhaps the most fundamental and the one that resonates the most with the public is its role in the education of young adults. In short, it is the area of undergraduate education that is often taken to be the lifeblood of the American university. The work of the university in this area revolves around the cognitive development, intellectual maturation, social and cultural discovery, and personal growth of individual students. It is this area of higher education that receives much of the attention of the public and elected officials, and it is an area in which various types of information must be gathered and considered in order to assess the success of an institution's effort in providing a quality education to its students. One approach to obtaining pertinent information in this effort is by asking students directly about their educational pursuits, interests, and experiences.

This executive summary presents some of the major findings of three undergraduate surveys undertaken by the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning over the last few years. The surveys are the *1997 Graduating Student Opinion Survey*, the *Continuing Student Opinion Survey*, and the *Attrition Survey*. Through the information collected from the administration of these surveys, a picture of undergraduates at Rutgers emerges. These are students who are ambitious and academically bright and have a variety of goals and expectations, both academic and general; who rate their time and experiences at the university highly; who hold strong opinions about the student life climate at Rutgers; and who are active in extracurricular activities while also working, some quite extensively, in jobs unrelated to their studies.

Contrary to the hand-wringing of the recent Carnegie sponsored Boyer Commission report, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities*, there is much good news at Rutgers. Probably this is because the changes called for in that report were adumbrated here by solid actions taken earlier in this decade. Simply stated, student opinion of undergraduate education and the undergraduate experience at Rutgers is positive whether it is viewed by graduating students, currently enrolled students, or even by students who have chosen to leave Rutgers before completing their studies. Moreover, in many specific instances there is clear evidence that investments made by the University during the 1990s have led to tangible improvements that are benefitting students and for which they are clearly appreciative.

Among these investments are the following:

- Improvements to critical student services such as financial aid (through the introduction of direct lending) and registration (through touch-tone telephone registration service).
- Increased academic support through a dramatically enhanced computer service, the modernization and expansion of the library system, the creation of Teaching Excellence Centers (TEC), and the Learning Resource Centers (LRC) throughout the University.

- Expansion of the Citizenship and Service Education Program, which now serves 2,000 students each year.
- Enhancement of multicultural understanding and development of common purposes through the implementation of the Multicultural Blueprint.
- Strengthening undergraduate education through the development of new curricular offerings, supported by the University Strategic Plan.
- Enhancement of the University environment through the Organizational Quality and Communication Improvement program, QCI.
- Improved recreational and dormitory facilities.
- Establishment of the Office of Undergraduate Education: to provide oversight to the TECs and LRCs; to foster greater opportunities for undergraduates through grant programs such as Rutgers Dialogue Grants, Undergraduate Curriculum Seed Grants, and Teaching Evaluation Development Grants; and to create an inventory of 300 research experiences available to students throughout the university.

RESULTS

Academic Experience

Student responses to the undergraduate surveys indicate that they consider their education at Rutgers to be world-class. Nine out of ten graduating students agreed that Rutgers offers high-quality programs. Of the 1997 graduates surveyed, 84 percent agreed or strongly agreed that Rutgers offered a high-quality major in their field of study, up 4 percent over the responses of students to the 1992 survey. Moreover, in rating their overall academic experience, 25 percent of students said it was excellent, a substantial increase over the 19 percent who said so in 1992, while 86 percent of the 1997 students thought it was good to excellent, an increase of 3 percent. In contrast, only one percent in either year considered their experience to have been poor.

Seventy-four percent of the students who were continuing their enrollment at the time of the survey also considered their academic experience to be good or excellent. This finding suggests that as Rutgers students progress through their course of study they are exposed to new challenges and opportunities that enhance their appreciation of their undergraduate experience. Even among the students who left Rutgers without graduating, 88 percent indicated that they felt Rutgers offered high-quality programs, and over 50 percent of these students rated their Rutgers academic experience positively.

What are some of the ways in which students say they have grown academically while at Rutgers?

Results from the surveys reveal that students have become more focused in their academic pursuits during the 1990s. Whereas two out of three graduating students in 1992 declared that it was important to obtain a degree at the time of the survey, almost nine out of ten graduates selected this as an important goal in 1997. Similar increases were also revealed in responses to other academic goals, such as the desire to increase knowledge in an academic field, increase one's communication skills, and improve critical thinking. Moreover, higher percentages of students in 1997 compared to 1992 indicated that they have achieved or were achieving these academic goals. Analysis of the responses from continuing students show, not surprisingly, that more students achieve their academic goals as they progress through their undergraduate careers.

Students also indicated strong emphasis on obtaining career skills. Continuing students selected the category of career goals as the most important among the various types of goals presented, though these goals were not achieved at the same rate as academic goals. Roughly two-thirds of graduates in 1997 and 1992 indicated they had improved their knowledge, technical skills, and/or competence in work-related areas. However, the number of these students who felt they had substantially achieved this goal jumped by 20 percent (48% to 68%) between 1992 and 1997. Indeed, those among the 1997 graduates who felt their Rutgers education had improved their chances for a raise or promotion were much higher than in 1992 (51% vs. 37%). Graduating students in 1997 also felt that they were able to formulate long-term career plans and to discover career interests at higher rates than 1992 graduates (55% vs 40% and 63% vs 49%, respectively).

One of the factors most critical to students in identifying and achieving academic and career skills is the role played by faculty. Indeed, survey results suggest that there is a link between the importance and achievement of academic and career goals and the amount of contact students have with faculty. A larger percentage of 1997 graduates indicated greater contact with faculty on a frequent or occasional basis than graduates in 1992 (66% vs 58%). When asked about the types of contact they had with faculty, graduating students in 1997 indicated that much of their contact with faculty had occurred in traditional settings (e.g., nine out of ten graduating students had at least "a little" contact with faculty during a faculty member's office hours or after class). These contacts typically entailed discussions regarding future education and/or career considerations (approximately 80% of all 1997 graduates indicated they had these types of discussions with faculty).

Substantially more students in the class of 1997 agreed that they were able to participate in a research project than in 1992 (60% vs 43%). Thirty percent of 1997 graduates had the opportunity to be directly involved in a faculty member's research, while nearly half of all 1997 graduates discussed a faculty member's research. Perhaps not unexpectedly, students further along in their undergraduate careers tend to have more contact and a more positive view of the role of faculty than students early in their studies. Analysis of data from the survey of

continuing students revealed an increase in the frequency and types of contact with faculty as students progressed through their studies.

What are some of the outcomes of the enhanced academic experience of undergraduates at Rutgers?

Graduating students in 1997 felt that they were more independent, self-reliant, and adaptable than their 1992 counterparts (80% vs. 68%) and felt they had improved their leadership skills at a higher rate as well (64% vs. 51%).

The future prospects for the 1997 graduates were bright indeed, not only for themselves but for New Jersey and the region. Of those with jobs at the time they graduated in 1997, 73 percent indicated they were working in New Jersey with a further 23 percent working somewhere in the Northeast. Forty-four percent of those employed indicated an annual salary of \$30,000 or higher. This reflects their significant contribution to our economy.

Seventy-eight percent of the 1997 graduating student survey respondents indicated that they would pursue an advanced degree, with 82 percent planning to do so within the next five years. Of those listing a graduate or professional school on the 1997 graduating survey, two out of three indicated that their first choice was an AAU research university. This is a tremendous endorsement of, and appreciation for, the undergraduate education provided at Rutgers.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Considering the many steps Rutgers has taken to enhance the undergraduate experience, it is not surprising to see Rutgers students fully engaged in extracurricular pursuits. Among the 1997 graduates, two-thirds of all respondents stated that they had participated in student life and campus activities. Among the continuing students, over half of the respondents noted they participated in extracurricular activities, with academic and professional organizations, community service, ethnic organizations, and intramural sports among those most frequently cited. Levels of participation increased with class-standing, especially in the areas of community service and academic and professional organizations, a sign that students become more involved in both their studies and co-curricular pursuits as they progress academically. Striking such a balance is especially difficult given the fact that many students are employed at the same time they are enrolled. Eighty-two percent of graduating students report that they worked during the school year while two out of three continuing students reported being employed while in school. The majority of students who graduated (52%) typically work 11-25 hours per week; continuing students reported spending approximately an average of 30 hours per week in school-related activities.

Since Rutgers' diversity is a defining characteristic, it is important for the university to foster an environment where understanding and appreciation of different cultures and backgrounds are valued. Rutgers continues

to make progress toward this goal. For example, 73 percent of the 1997 graduating students indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that students from various racial and ethnic groups got along well at Rutgers, an increase of seven percent since the survey was last done in 1992. Almost all graduating students (nearly 90%) agreed that it was important for Rutgers to offer a multicultural environment. Even students who left the university before completing a degree held these views.

The many initiatives taken to improve the student experience are reflected in increased satisfaction--an important measure of the value-for-money philosophy Rutgers strives to achieve and the public demands. Of the thirty-three services that the class of 1997 were asked to evaluate, twenty-eight satisfied 70 percent of the students who used them, and several of these services showed marked improvement in student satisfaction over the 1992 assessment. These services included registration, campus security, class scheduling, financial aid, student employment, health services, career planning, student centers, and academic support services. In general, similar rates of high satisfaction were shown by students with regard to such areas as the library, student centers, recreational services, the bookstore, and admissions, whether they were graduating, continuing their studies, or had left the university.

Another measure of the value-for-money perspective is the student perception of tuition and fees. Eighty-six percent of 1997 graduates agreed or strongly agreed that the cost of attending Rutgers was reasonable, an increase of nearly 10 percent over the 1992 assessment.

CHALLENGES

While the results of these three surveys depict solid gains, the surveys also reveal a number of areas where continuing attention is needed. Although Rutgers has one of the lowest student attrition rates among its AAU peers, it still approaches 25 percent after three years. Academic reasons are frequently cited, as are financial ones.

Although the student perception of student-faculty interaction has improved, there remains much to be done in this area. Survey responses indicate that intensive faculty-student interaction requires continued enhancement and stimulation. As indicated earlier, the vast majority of our students are engaged not only in classroom pursuits, but also in co-curricular activities and work. Since the results of the surveys also show that student-faculty interaction increases with class level, efforts to increase interaction might be most effective if targeted to the early years of enrollment.

In terms of services, there are several where roughly one-third or more of the graduating students indicated dissatisfaction: parking, transportation, dining services, and academic advising. Efforts to address these areas are underway.

SUMMARY

The background and detailed results of this series of student opinion surveys follows. They provide a rich and varied set of responses that can be viewed from a variety of differing perspectives: campus, school, gender, ethnicity, age, class level, income, and parental education, to name but a few of the possibilities. The reports point to progress in improving undergraduate education and identify areas to which we must dedicate greater attention in the coming years. Clearly, Rutgers is moving in the right direction. The demands of the next few decades will require us to carefully and continually assess our strengths and weaknesses and make adjustments to keep us in the vanguard of quality and innovation, the hallmark of land-grant institutions. These reports and future updates will allow us to benchmark our progress in that effort.

BACKGROUND TO THE SURVEYS

These surveys asked undergraduates from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, various questions regarding their short- and long-range goals, academic expectations and plans, assessment of their Rutgers academic experience, type and extent of faculty contact, and evaluations of student services and student life activities. Not all questions were asked on all surveys and there were often variations in the content of questions to suit the goals of each survey. For example, the *Attrition Survey* included questions about why respondents left the university. The *Continuing Student Opinion Survey* asked extensively about student employment and contact with faculty, and the *1997 Graduating Student Opinion Survey* asked questions about future academic and employment plans. On the other hand, these surveys also contained sections that were quite similar in the type of questions asked of the respective respondents. Questions about student goals and assessment of their academic experience and student services at the university were asked of respondents to all three surveys.

All three surveys were administered through mailing services. The university's campus mail system was used most extensively in this effort, with the U.S. Postal System being used for the *Attrition Survey* mailings, for one mailing of the survey of graduating students in 1997, and for some students who could not be reached by campus mail. The response rates for both the *1997 Graduating Student Opinion Survey* and *Continuing Student Opinion Survey* approached 50 percent, while the response rate for the *Attrition Survey* was slightly under 30 percent. Although the response rate for the *Attrition Survey* was rather low for mail surveys generally, it falls within the middle range of an expected 15 to 40 percent for surveys of student attrition.¹

A critical task when undertaking surveys is to inquire if the individuals responding to the surveys are representative of the population from which they were drawn. The respondents to each survey, with some minor exceptions, were quite similar to their respective population. Survey respondents came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The educational and income level of parents of respondents were evenly distributed. Most respondents were unmarried and more students lived on campus than off campus. Although we are not able to confirm that these characteristics are reflective of the population from which these students belong,

there is also no indication that they are nonrepresentative of their target populations. Indeed, the fact that there is consistency in the characteristics of respondents across surveys, and that comparisons of secondary data show no major differences between respondents and their respective target population, supports the argument that these self-reported characteristics are unbiased.

Students responding to the surveys reflect the diversity of personal demographics and academic background of the university undergraduate student population. Minor variations exist in some of the characteristics of students across the three surveys, e.g., there was a higher percentage of nonwhite respondents to the *Continuing Student Opinion Survey* (43%) compared to the *Attrition Survey* (34%) and *1997 Graduating Student Opinion Survey* (35%); however, for the most part, the distribution of student characteristics across these surveys was quite similar.

A major goal of the analysis of the data from each survey was to provide basic comparisons among the undergraduates responding to the survey. For example, the *Continuing Student Opinion Survey Report* included extensive comparisons of student responses by gender, race/ethnicity, campus, and class level. In addition, responses to an earlier *Graduating Student Opinion Survey* undertaken in 1992 were used in the *1997 Graduating Student Opinion Survey Report* and the *Attrition Survey Report* to allow for other types of student comparisons that would not have been possible working entirely from the responses collected by these respective surveys. The 1992 data provided an opportunity to compare two groups of undergraduates who attended the university during approximately the same period of time, with one group having left the university and the other having graduated. The inclusion of data from the 1992 survey also allowed for the detection of changes among the perceptions of graduating students over a five year period.

Consequently, the range of questions and the extent of data collected, both for a wide cross-section of students and across time, provide a rich tapestry of information from which we can obtain a picture of the Rutgers undergraduate.

ENDNOTES

¹ Over the last few years, we have witnessed a decline in the response rates of students to surveys administered by the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning. Although college students are often seen as a population that will garner one of the highest response rates of target populations used by survey researchers, they do not seem immune to the growing trend of lower response rates to mail surveys. Two reasons are perhaps the most influential: the growing utilization of surveys by other administrative and academic units on campus to gather valuable student information, and the tremendous explosion of information-sharing through electronic means, such as the Internet. Both of these requests for information have become increasingly burdensome, and thereby affect negatively students' decision to respond.