

Focus on Research

**Report on 1995 Summer Sessions
Student Satisfaction Survey¹**

Elizabeth S. Grobsmith

Director, Summer Sessions

and Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The Survey

During the summer of 1995, the Summer Sessions office at the University of Nebraska undertook a comprehensive student survey of student perceptions of the summer program to help assess students' views and gather their recommendations about ways to better meet their needs. Because the office wanted the survey to be methodologically rigorous and the data reliable, it commissioned the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's (UNL) Bureau of Sociological Research to conduct a student satisfaction survey. The research design developed by the Bureau included administering surveys to a random sample of classes offered in each session, and conducting focus groups from these populations to gather more detailed information from selected groups of students. The research results provided invaluable data for improving summer planning—course scheduling, marketing, and delivery—as well as improvement in academic support services during the summer months.

Almost 80 percent of UNL students learn about the Summer Sessions office from the Summer Sessions bulletin; approximately 50 percent learned about it from their friends; 40 percent indicated that they knew about it because they had taken an earlier class; 35 percent had been informed about summer classes by their advisors, and about 22 percent

Student Satisfaction Survey

identified posters or brochures as the means by which they learned about the summer sessions office. Obviously, students learned about the office in multiple ways. This year the Summer Sessions office has developed an entry on UNL's web site and has a home page and an e-mail account in hope of reaching out to a much wider audience in the future.

Most students were complimentary about the Summer Sessions office, their learning experience, professors, course selection, and the intensive format of a condensed semester. However, certain criticisms appear repeatedly which reveal problem areas that need attention.

The survey results were distributed to a variety of individuals and offices on campus with the hope that feedback gathered during the summer would be taken positively and could guide us in all aspects of Summer Session planning and improve service to customers.

General Overview

At UNL, Summer Sessions consists of four sessions: a three-week pre-session, the first five-week session, the eight-week session (which is comprised of the pre-session and the first five-week session), and the second five-week session. About 10,000 students attend summer school. There are far more registrations than this—about 15,000—but Summer Sessions serves approximately 10,000 separate students who generally register multiply. For this research, the Bureau selected a random sample of classes with a projected sample of 500 respondents from each session. The Summer Sessions office provided a list of classes, instructors and class size. Each instructor was contacted by mail with a letter outlining the project and was sent a postcard to return if he or she was willing to participate. The instructor was then sent surveys for students to complete in class. The Summer Sessions office worked with researchers to identify questions around which focus groups were organized. The response from students was very positive—classes were more full than anticipated, and response rates were higher than usual.

Not all faculty who agreed to participate actually did administer the survey. Approximately 84 percent of faculty contacted had their students complete the survey, for a total of 1,946 participants. The Summer Sessions office worked with the Bureau staff assigned to this project to develop guidelines for focus groups that were to be conducted. Focus groups were conducted with undergraduates (juniors and seniors) and graduate students, in particular from Teachers College. As indicated earlier, summer enrollment has been diminishing steadily and seriously, and the Summer Sessions office wanted to know the cause of the decline so that it could make some recommendations to turn the trend

around. One encountered and unanticipated problem was the resignation of the faculty member from sociology assigned to the survey project—she was preparing to take a position at another institution, but was able to train students to complete the project. The director of the Bureau had to complete the analysis of the data.

Demographics

The majority of summer sessions students are undergraduates. Ninety-six percent of undergraduates and 72.3 percent of all students are traditional age college students, *i.e.*, under 24 years of age. Students between the ages of 25-29 are the next largest group of consumers (14.1 percent), followed by the 35-49 age group (6.7 percent), the 30-34 age group (5.9 percent), and lastly those 50 and above, who comprise only one percent of summer students. At UNL, the Summer Sessions office is not affiliated with the Division of Continuing Studies, whose mission is geared more towards serving continuing education needs.

Students are nearly evenly split by gender, with slightly more women than men enrolled (52.3 percent female, 47.7 percent male). Approximately 65 percent of students enrolling in summer sessions are juniors and seniors (about 25 percent and 40 percent respectively). Sophomores comprise nearly 14 percent, and freshmen still fewer at 4.4 percent. Approximately 16 percent of students are graduate students.

What Students Told the Summer Sessions Office

Students say that the main reason they take summer courses is so they can graduate on time. They often add that this is the time they can get major requirements out of the way so that they can graduate as early as possible. Other reasons cited included lessening course load during the academic year and avoiding scheduling conflicts.

Students indicated that the first five-week session (early June to mid-July) is the one they prefer to attend (44 percent of students so stated). However, some students, particularly those enrolled for graduate credit within Teachers College, expressed concern that even this session begins before they are free of their school-year responsibilities. The pre-session in May is very inconvenient for them, and they do not enroll until they are finished with their school year. Teachers notwithstanding, pre-session was ranked as the next most popular (35 percent), followed by the second five-week (10 percent) and the eight-week session (8 percent).

Many students enroll in more than one summer session. About 30 percent of students take between 4-6 credits during the summer—this is UNL's largest group—with approximately 26 percent enrolling in 7-

Student Satisfaction Survey

9 credits. About 19 percent enrolled in 0-3 credit hours. It appears, then, that most students take one or two classes per session throughout the summer. The relatively high number of credits students take throughout the summer, combined with the low number of credits taken per session, indicates that a significant portion—about 40 percent—of them are enrolled in more than one session.

The Quality of the Summer Program

Students' responses to taking classes during the summer was very positive: about 88 percent said they were somewhat to very satisfied; of these, 46 percent indicated that they were very satisfied. About 9 percent were unhappy, and only about 2.5 percent were very dissatisfied. Almost half (nearly 42 percent) of students indicated that courses offered during the summer were better than during the academic year. The reasons they cited included the view that professors were more relaxed, had more time for them, were more available, and that the atmosphere (*e.g.*, style of dress, etc.) was more relaxed and conducive to learning. Another reason students cited for their overall satisfaction with summer classes was that they had more regular professors rather than graduate assistants. This seems to have been an important element in their liking their classes. In general, students praised the instructors and smaller class size as two features of the summer sessions that they most appreciated.

Students seemed quite critical of several basic elements that they believed hindered their ability to do a good job on their courses during the summer. The three criticisms that stood out as most frequently cited were: (1) limited hours in which the library was open; (2) lack of sufficient access to computer labs; and (3) lack of sufficient access to language laboratories. Other complaints about the summer were: difficulty with parking; difficulty with getting financial aid in time to pay bills in a timely way; and cancellation of classes. Course cancellation was heavily criticized by students, because such cancellation (due to lack of sufficient enrollment) disappointed them and spoiled their plans for completing certain requirements on time, and for some even their graduation date. Such disappointment is a serious problem for students, and is best addressed by careful departmental planning. The Summer Sessions office is trying to do a better job of this during the current year, guiding those colleges with historically heavy cancellations to plan course selection carefully so as not to disappoint students. Since we provide a three-year history of course enrollments to all departments for their planning, there is little reason to schedule a course which has historically suffered cancellation. Departments do want to try innova-

tions during the summer, but this must be balanced by the risk of low enrollment.

Specific curricular suggestions (criticisms) included the desire for more upper division courses, such as in the language areas; and for more applied approaches, particularly for teachers. Teachers returning to UNL for continuing education wanted workshops to be three, rather than two, credits in order to better meet certification needs.

The majority of students participating in the survey rated UNL's facilities and services as excellent to fair; however, one area—financial aid services—received a fairly even distribution of ratings from excellent to poor. Students stated that financial aid was not available in a timely enough fashion to pay their tuition bills, and the imposition of a late fee seemed unreasonable to them. On a more positive note, students found registration services to be outstanding, and very much commended the University for its new touch tone registration system. Last summer was the first summer for touch-tone registration. While students loved it, it was a bit harder for the staff because the registration numbers changed daily. In the past there was a close-down period prior to the beginning of the class at which time assessments could be made regarding whether enrollment in a given course was sufficient to have it “go”; now our numbers are a moving target.

A third of the students reported no experience with the libraries. Comments students made in focus groups included numerous statements about wanting the libraries open for longer hours during the summer, more like the academic year. Some students noted that after they got off work in the evening they needed to come to the library, but found the facility in the process of closing.

Nearly one-half of survey respondents said that they had had no experience with use of computer facilities. Of the students who did use computer labs, numerous comments focused on the limited number of hours the labs were available to students. Many indicated that their academic work would be far better supported if these facilities could be more available to them during the summer.

Another student concern was that language lab hours were too limited, which made it difficult to manage in conjunction with their work schedules. While some professors gave students permission and keys to use the lab, those students without such access found it difficult to use the lab because of its limited hours of access.

Students requested that more courses be available to them during the evening hours. Historically, summer sessions has not been able to offer courses after 5:00 p.m.; this was considered the responsibility of the division of continuing studies. Students' complaints, coupled with

Student Satisfaction Survey

increasing departmental wishes to offer courses in the evening and by satellite pushed summer sessions to seek clarification of the 5:00 p.m. rule. The office is allowed to offer evening courses and will do so from now on. It seems that historically the 5:00 p.m. deadline was understood as the time after which the division of continuing studies has exclusive access. However, the actual situation was that as long as the instructional activity was within the allowable limits for full-time employment during the summer, instruction at any hour was acceptable. By Regents policy, we cannot pay overtime for instruction, but we can offer evening classes as a part of a faculty member's regular summer teaching load.

Students told us that they did not believe that the arts and co-curricular activities offered this past summer were sufficiently well-advertised for them to be able to take advantage of such programming. Our student newspaper is published only once per week during the summer months, so notice of the weekly noon-time entertainment series was limited. Our need for better advertisement and promotion during the summer has already been conveyed to the student organization which plans such events and sponsors them with student fees. The use of student fees as subvention for arts activities was enormously successful. Student fees subsidized buying one "house" for each of three productions put on by our repertory theater, an equity actors company that included a barbecue and show—all for \$5. Student attendance doubled this year and the hope is that it will do so again in the coming summer.

Planned Changes as a Result of the Survey

By sharing the results of the summer sessions survey with unit administrators, and in particular with those departments in which students requested changes, the summer sessions office was modestly successful in making the following changes on campus:

Library hours: In the coming summer, the library will be open one hour later each evening during the week, extending accessibility to students by five hours.

Evening classes: The summer sessions now offers evening courses—something not done before.

Computer labs: More computer labs have been established for the upcoming summer, and existing labs have upgraded their equipment.

More access to language labs: The hope was that language labs would be more available to students this summer, but because of asbestos removal, the building in which a lab is housed will be out of commission for nearly two years; so as it seems, the summer sessions office will be lucky to even maintain the level of availability it enjoyed last summer. The modern languages department has agreed to add evening hours during the second five-week session. And, if they can afford it and if utilization of the language lab for administering the modern languages placement exam to entering freshmen is not too demanding, they may be able to add a few hours of access during the first five-week session.

Dissemination of information on student activities: This coming summer promotional materials announcing student recreational activities will be made available much earlier. An announcement of summer events will be made by the second week of March; an advertisement campaign has been planned and devised; and a big poster featuring all the events will be available before the end of the semester. Hence, currently enrolled students can check out the opportunities for summer recreation. These materials will be in the hands of all student assistants in the dormitories and all Greek houses as well. It appears, then, that students will have far more information about what's happening on campus this summer.

What the summer sessions office has learned has enabled it to seek avenues to improve services on which students' academic success is dependent, and it has enabled the office to channel communication about ways to serve students better by supplying concrete information about areas to target for improvement. Summer sessions are gratified by the strong student participation in this survey and hopes to continue and effect change in UNL summer sessions' programs as a result. The other significant result of presenting the above survey data to the university community was communicating the prominence and importance of the summer sessions. As the unit most invisible on campus and least thought about by higher level administrators, this is one avenue for keeping the breadth of the summer program highly visible on campus.

Note

1. This research was funded in part by a grant from the North Central Conference on Summer Schools. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's office of summer sessions wishes to express its appreciation to NCCSS for its support. We also wish to acknowledge the excellent service awarded us by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Bureau of Sociological Research.

Student Satisfaction Survey

From start to finish, the Bureau designed and carried out the project with great success and one that has produced information invaluable to us in our future planning.