

Academic Matters

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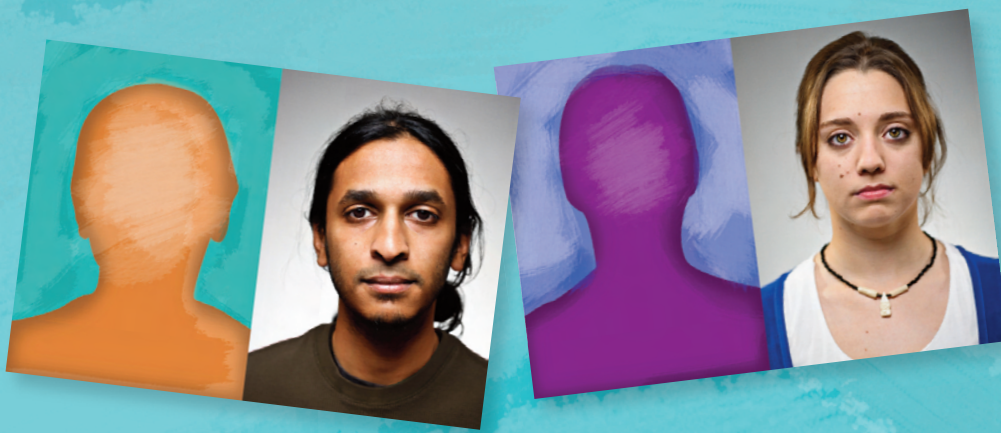
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Knowing Your Undergraduates

Ken Steele



With career-oriented students seeking variety in their university experiences, universities are diversifying their appeal. The downsides are often talked about, but this evolution could well help universities in regions of population decline survive, while offering students clearer choices among a broader range of educational options.

Alors que les étudiants poursuivant des études spécialisées recherchent la variété dans leurs expériences universitaires, les universités diversifient leurs intérêts. Les inconvénients font souvent l'objet de discussion, mais l'évolution pourrait bien aider les universités à survivre dans les régions où la population diminue, tout en offrant aux étudiants des choix plus clairs parmi un éventail élargi d'options éducatives.

Over the past two or three decades, Canadian undergraduates have been steadily evolving, in ways both obvious and subtle, causing university faculty both delight and dismay. Hundreds of personal interactions in the classroom give lecturers real insight into the unique individuals they teach and cumulatively provide them with a sense of broad trends over time. Anecdotal perceptions, however, can be distorted in many ways. Students vary regionally, by subject area of interest, demographically, and in their motivation and expectations, but few faculty members encounter a significant cross-section of students

Millennium Scholarship Foundation has supported a range of research projects into accessibility, funding, and the educational motivations of traditionally under-represented groups. For the past 14 years, Academica Group has conducted the University & College Applicant Study (UCAS™) surveying more than 250,000 applicants on behalf of 40 or so colleges and universities each spring, posing more than 350 questions about student perceptions of institutions, their choices and preferences, and uncovering intriguing insights into their motivations and the most effective ways to communi-



across disciplines and across the country. In most circumstances, faculty interactions with students are weighted toward the most academically inclined, who may have more in common with their older instructors than the average undergraduate. With age and experience, nostalgia may distort memories of past generations of students. And each year first-year students get younger (while, of course, faculty get no older). Undergraduates never lose sight of the fact that they are being evaluated for their interactions with faculty and, therefore, may not be entirely frank.

These are just some of the reasons why quantitative, statistical data can provide new insights into student cohorts in the aggregate and can measure long-term trends with greater objectivity and precision than anecdotal experience. There are many sources of statistical information about undergraduate students. Statistics Canada and Human Resources Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) have gathered some data on undergraduates consistently over many years while, for the past decade, the Canada

Millennium Scholarship Foundation has supported a range of research projects into accessibility, funding, and the educational motivations of traditionally under-represented groups. And although there are differences between Canadian and American undergraduates, some very useful national data is also gathered and analyzed regularly by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

A GROWING CONSUMER MINDSET

Publicly or privately, many academics lament the growing consumer mindset of undergraduate students, who increasingly seem to regard higher education as a commodity they purchase. They price shop for scholarships and bursaries and place the onus on faculty to teach rather more than on themselves to learn.¹ In many American jurisdictions, students and parents have attempted to launch "educational malpractice" lawsuits against colleges and school districts and College Parents of America conducts a national customer service survey on "College Parent Experience."² So things could get even worse in Canada.

But, in many ways, American and Canadian universities have both contributed to the consumer mindset of students

Undergraduate students are increasingly focused on employment outcomes and career-related university programs.

and parents through decades of steadily rising tuition fees, escalating levels of service and facilities, and an emphasis on the career return on investment (ROI) of an undergraduate degree: the so-called “million dollar bonus.” As more and more universities brand and market their offerings to prospective students, and national and international university rankings emphasize the importance of institutional reputation, small wonder that undergraduates perceive themselves to be in a “buyer’s market” in which they have myriad choices. These, and a number of other intersecting forces, have shaped today’s typical incoming undergraduate and will further shape undergraduate cohorts for years to come.

FOCUSED ON EDUCATIONAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Since 1982, the financial picture for Canadian universities has fundamentally deteriorated. Full-time enrolment has doubled, but full-time faculty complements have increased barely 40 per cent, resulting in increasing class sizes and diminishing faculty-student interaction on virtually every campus.³ Even before the financial market meltdown of 2008 decimated university endowments and pension funds, institutions were increasingly dependent on revenues from research, patents, advancement, and, of course, tuition to balance their budgets.

Beyond question, the “sticker price” for university education in Canada has risen significantly in the past twenty years. In the 1970s and 1980s, the average Canadian university student paid the equivalent of about \$2,000 in current dollars for tuition, whether enrolled in a traditional arts program or a professional program. By 2007, however, average tuition for arts students had doubled (to \$4,000), for law students had tripled (to \$7,334), for medical students had quintupled (\$9,937) and for dentistry students had increased by a factor of seven (to \$14,000).⁴ Even in recent months, proposed tuition increases for some professional university programs have ranged from 66 per cent to 80 per cent to 1,500 per cent.⁵ Tuitions vary widely between disciplines and also between provinces: as of 2006, average tuition fees in Nova Scotia exceeded \$6,000, while fees in Newfoundland and Labrador were closer to \$2,500, and in Quebec were just \$2,000.⁶

Yet rising tuition has not generally made Canadian undergraduate applicants particularly price-sensitive. Where particularly high and low tuition fees are in adjacent provinces, such as Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, there has

been significant interprovincial migration to lower tuition fees at Memorial University. But data from the *UCAS™ Applicant Study* suggests that tuition fees are among the least of some 50 considerations for prospective undergraduate students when determining their post-secondary destination. Financially, they are more concerned with the availability of scholarship funding, work-study options, and co-op programs as ways to fund their education.

Governments and universities have defended escalating tuition fees by emphasizing the career return on investment that undergraduate students can anticipate, supposedly a million dollars over a lifetime. This emphasis on ROI has had unintended consequences. Undergraduate students are increasingly focused on employment outcomes and career-related university programs. They are attracted by higher potential earnings and also, perhaps somewhat perversely, by the suggestion of higher value implicit in higher tuition fees. For the 2010 incoming class, the perception that “grads get good jobs” is the number 4 consideration, after the academic reputation of the institution, its program, and the quality of faculty.⁸ Perhaps inevitably, interest in the humanities has waned as students focus more on the direct career utility of their degree. Jeff Rybak suggests that students are even making “safer” choices of program, major, and research themes to maximize their ROI on education.⁹

JUGGLING SCHOOL AND WORK

Although Canadian universities report an overall decline in part-time undergraduate enrolment over the past

1 Many of these arguments are summarized in *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*, by James Coté and Anton L. Allahar (University of Toronto Press, 2007).

2 College Parents of America hosts a website at www.collegeparents.org and a blog naturally enough entitled “Hoverings.”

3 Statistics Canada and AUCC estimates, 2006.

4 CAUT Almanac of Post-Secondary Education in Canada, 2008-09.

5 In November 2009, the University of Alberta proposed tuition increases of up to 66% for some professional programs, and a new “non-academic fee.” In April 2010, the University of Manitoba proposed a 54% increase in tuition for undergraduate business students, and a 78.5% increase for MBA students. In April 2010, McGill made national headlines by proposing to increase Desautels MBA tuition to \$29,500, over the objections of the province.

6 Statistics Canada data.

7 2010 UCAS Applicant Study, by Academica Group.

8 2010 UCAS Applicant Study, by Academica Group.

9 Jeff Rybak, *What’s Wrong with University and How to Make it Work for You Anyway* (ECW Press, 2007).

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decade, the statistics may be misleading; undergrads are spending progressively less time studying and more time working at paid employment, while still being classified as full-time students. A recent meta-analysis of national datasets in the U.S. found that on average, undergraduates in 1961 spent 25 hours per week on their studies, and that by 2003 that had dropped to just 15 hours per week, despite traditional university expectations of 30 hours per week.¹⁰ This time compression was fairly consistent regardless of discipline or hours worked at paid employment.

In Canada, too, without question, undergrads are spending more time on paid employment. Thirty-year trends in employment rates of full-time students show steady increases in employment, from less than 25 per cent of students in 1976 to about 40 per cent of male students and more than 50 per cent of female students in 2009.¹¹ American statistics show a very similar trend over the same period for full-time students and, in particular, detect a doubling of the number of full-time students working 20-34 hours per week since 1970.¹² Being a “full-time” undergraduate today is something rather different than it was 30 years ago.

Undergraduates in Canada and the U.S. are studying less, working more, and taking longer to complete their degrees. On average, students take five to six years to complete their “four-year” undergraduate degrees. Just 29 per cent of undergraduates at public U.S. universities complete their degree in four years. A further 26 per cent take five or six years to complete.¹³ Just one quarter of university students today follow the path of the traditional, full-time, residential undergraduate. If these trends continue, universities may have to rethink the model of an immersive, four-year, undergraduate degree program. Indeed, many schools have already started

experimenting with three-year accelerated programs, part-time offerings, and distance education to serve these “non-traditional” students.

CAREERISM IN A TOUGH ECONOMY

Student advocates claim that the increase in employment by full-time students and the increasing time to complete a degree are a direct result of rising tuition fees. However, the opportunity cost of a student forgoing employment to spend an extra year in university far exceeds the cost of tuition, so it seems unlikely that these trends are being driven by purely financial factors. Instead, they appear to be linked to rising careerism and concerns with employment outcomes among all undergraduate applicants; students want a balanced resumé, including academics and work experience, by the time they graduate and hit the job market.

Canadian undergraduates have shown a steadily increasing emphasis on career outcomes in contemplating post-secondary education. In 2010, fully 99 per cent of university applicants indicated that their reasons for applying to university included “career preparation” or “career advancement” up from 95 per cent just one year earlier.¹⁴ By comparison, only about three-quarters of applicants indicated their motivations included “personal or intellectual growth” or “increasing knowledge,” and a paltry one-third indicated a desire to “give back to society.” Annual application volume reports from the Ontario University Application Centre demonstrate quite clearly that undergraduate applicants respond in weeks or months to shifts in the economy and labour market forecasts. The market of prospective students responds far faster to economic changes than the program offerings at our universities.

BETTER INFORMED EDUCATION “BUYERS”

Over the past 14 years, more and more information channels have become available to prospective Canadian undergraduates contemplating their postsecondary options. Institutional websites have risen rapidly in importance and are now the most accessed and reportedly most influential information source, used by 94 per cent of undergraduate applicants (up from 88 per cent in 2008).¹⁵ Many university websites contain tens of thousands of pages of information, online course calendars, and downloadable viewbooks or brochures. The internet has also multiplied and extended the impact of word-of-mouth through social media. More than 80 per cent of Canadian undergraduate applicants are regular

10 Phillip Babcock and Mindy Marks, *Leisure College USA: The Decline in Student Study Time* (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, August 2010).

11 Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey, cited in Anne Motte and Saul Schwartz, *Are Student Employment and Academic Success Linked?* (Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation Research Note #9, April 2009.)

12 US Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey*, October Supplement, 1970-2007.

13 IPEDS (Integrated PostSecondary Education Data System), US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Spring 2007, graduation rates component.

14 Academica Group, UCAS Applicant Study, 2009 and 2010 data.

15 Academica Group, UCAS Applicant Study, 2008-2010 data.

16 Academica Group, UCAS Web Usage Survey, 2009.

17 Academica Group, UCAS Applicant Study, 2008-2010 data.

users of Facebook, as much as 90 minutes per day.¹⁶ Some universities have leveraged YouTube and iTunesU to deliver sample lectures and campus tour videos to a wider audience, while students have published less formal video (to say the least) of residence parties and campus life.

The rise of the internet has ushered in an information explosion for prospective undergraduates, but the current generation is also accessing other forms of information to an unprecedented degree. In the past few years, university applicants have increased their use of printed university viewbooks (from 65 per cent in 2008 to 81 per cent in 2010) and program

40 per cent each for applicants overall). Canadian high school seniors are not yet being deluged with print materials by mail, phone calls, and personal appeals as their American counterparts are, but they are accessing information about university choices to an unprecedented degree. In many ways, this is the best informed generation of university “consumers” ever.

FACED WITH MORE CHOICES

In many parts of Canada, the number of youth is in decline, so prospective university students face few anxieties about university acceptance.



or faculty brochures (from 70 per cent in 2008 to 78 per cent in 2010).¹⁷ Applicants have reported steadily increasing use of high school liaison presentations (now 64 per cent of undergraduate applicants in Canada), regional university fairs and high school guidance counselors (now both at 49 per cent), Maclean's rankings (now 44 per cent), formal campus tours and open houses (now about 41 per cent each).

Applicants' heightened appetite for information has been met with greater transparency and efforts at communication by universities themselves. Increasing use of websites and print materials has only been made possible by additional investments in web content and increased press runs of brochures and viewbooks. Rising attendance at regional university fairs and at the Ontario Universities Fair in Toronto (now attracting in a single weekend more than 100,000 prospective students and their parents) has led universities to make larger investments in displays and staffing. And applicants are reporting steadily increasing frequency of contact from universities by email and telephone (now about

They believe they are in a “buyer's market” for higher education. As universities have begun branding and marketing regionally and nationally, crossing traditional “catchment areas” and competing more aggressively with each other for students, applicants are becoming aware of more institutions and conscious of a greater degree of choice. This may be accelerated by centralized application centres like those in Ontario and Alberta, which make it effortless for prospective students to “shop around” for programs.

Universities are competing for students not only through innovative program offerings and generous financial aid but also by more overt promotional strategies. Some are conducting online contests for prizes ranging from iPads to SmartCars to tuition discounts. Many institutions guarantee residence accommodation for first-year undergraduates; some, such as Lakehead University, guarantee scholarships at particular grade averages, while the University of Calgary guarantees completion of a four-year degree within four years. The University of Regina now guarantees employment within six months of graduation. Although these “guaran-

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tees" actually require significant commitment and effort from the student, the overall impression is increasingly one of education as a product for sale, satisfaction guaranteed. It remains to be seen whether such guarantees proliferate or if, in fact, they are a temporary fad that will fade over time.

Today's university students, focused on career outcomes and ROI, are also more open to considering other categories of postsecondary education. Although most high school seniors applying to Canadian universities are not considering community college as an alternative, more than half of university applicants over age 25 are perfectly willing to do so.¹⁸ Canada's community colleges are increasingly offering applied degrees, joint and collaborative degrees, post-degree diploma programs, and career-oriented education aimed at either university graduates or traditional university applicants. Nine institutions across Canada have branded themselves polytechnics (although most are not formally so designated by their provincial ministries). Their association, Polytechnics Canada, is working to educate the public about this new category of degree-granting college conducting applied research. Some colleges and universities are working together to create hybrid institutions, such as the University of Guelph-Humber and Seneca@York, offering prospective students "the best of both worlds"; namely, a more hands-on, career-oriented university education. And of course the cooperative education model pioneered at the University of Waterloo fifty years ago has fostered the expectation among many university applicants that they should be able to gain real-world work experience during their undergraduate education and, in many cases, earn significant money while still a student. Today's undergraduate students have more diverse and varied choices for postsecondary education and are likely to pursue more complex educational pathways on their way to the workplace.

MORE HETEROGENEOUS THAN EVER

Any overview, however, of trends affecting Canadian university applicants risks oversimplifying an entire generation because undergraduate students are more heterogeneous than ever. More mature applicants are returning to school, more Aboriginal youth are pursuing higher education, more new Canadians and first-generation Canadians are applying to university, more international students are choosing to study in Canada, so incoming student cohorts are more diverse than ever. Declining fertility rates in Canada will ensure that our nation's youth popula-

tion will be more and more a result of immigration, and future classes of undergraduates will continue to be more and more diverse demographically.

Compounding this demographic diversity, applicants from different provinces and those entering different disciplines have discernibly different expectations and motivations for pursuing a university education. While career outcomes and institutional reputation is vital for virtually all students, applicants to the arts and humanities are somewhat more attracted by international exchanges, campus amenities, and student life, while business applicants are more focused on co-op opportunities, institutional rankings, and entrance requirements. Applicants to the sciences are somewhat more interested in research capacity, both high-profile research being conducted at the institution and the opportunity to participate in research as undergraduates. Social science applicants are measurably more concerned about finances, while computer science applicants are interested in learning with the latest technology.¹⁹

As prospective Canadian undergraduates become more diverse, more focused on career outcomes and financial ROI, better informed and more aware of the variety of postsecondary options available, we can reasonably expect our universities to become more responsive to economic and labour market shifts, more innovative in interdisciplinary and applied programs, and more competitive and data-driven in marketing their programs to potential students. Undergraduate students are a heterogeneous group, seeking a variety of rather different university experiences, and forward-looking universities are finding ways to distinguish themselves on the basis of learning style, research expertise, campus experience, and employment outcomes. This diversification of institutional approach and positioning not only helps ensure the survival of longstanding universities in regions facing population decline but also serves Canadian students by offering them clearer choices among a broader range of educational options. **AM**

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18 Academica Group, UCAS Applicant Study, 2010 data.

19 Academica Group, UCAS Applicant Study, 2008-2010 data. Applicants to these and other programs are analyzed on the basis of the 50 key decision factors in selecting a university in a series of mini white papers by Ken Steele, available at http://www.academica.ca/intelligence/white_papers.