

First Year at University: Perceptions and Experiences of Students

EDWARD A. HOLDAWAY AND KAREN R. KELLOWAY*

ABSTRACT

This study was initiated by concerns in the literature over freshman students and by the need to know more about students' perceptions of their university experience. In 1984, all 937 first-year students in the Faculties of Arts, Business, Education, Engineering, and Science who had come directly to the University of Alberta from high school were asked about their university experiences and the transition from high school. Family members, the University's reputation, and the University's proximity exerted the greatest influence upon the decision to attend. Preparation for an interesting career, obtaining a well-paying job, and learning about topics of special interest were the most important goals associated with their programs. Students considered that they were best prepared in reading skills, listening skills, and taking notes, and least well prepared in budgeting time, library skills, and study skills. Most assessed that they were working considerably harder than at high school, and many said that high school had not adequately prepared them for university. The greatest need to adjust occurred in amount of work, stress, difficulty of work, and methods of instruction. Students varied considerably in the extent to which their expectations were met and the time taken to feel "at ease."

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude est née d'une part, des préoccupations soulevées dans les publications sur les étudiants nouvellement inscrits à l'université et d'autre part, de la nécessité de mieux connaître leur perception sur leur expérience universitaire. En 1984, tous les étudiants de première année des Facultés des Arts, du Commerce, de l'Éducation, de l'Ingénierie et des Sciences venant des écoles secondaires pour entrer directement à l'Université de l'Alberta ont été interrogés sur la transition de l'école secondaire et sur leur expérience universitaire. Ce sont les membres de

*Dr. Holdaway is Professor of Educational Administration and Director of Institutional Research and Planning at the University of Alberta. Ms. Kelloway is Academic Analyst in the Office of Institutional Research and Planning at the University of Alberta.

la famille, la réputation de l'Université et sa proximité qui ont exercé la plus grande influence sur leur décision de s'inscrire. La préparation d'une carrière intéressante, l'obtention d'un travail bien rémunéré et la connaissance de sujets présentant un intérêt particulier ont été les principaux facteurs qui ont déterminé leur choix de programme. Les étudiants ont considéré qu'ils avaient bien été préparés dans leur compétence à lire, écouter, et prendre des notes, et moins bien préparés dans leur compétence à gérer leur temps, étudier et se servir de la bibliothèque. La plupart ont considéré qu'ils travaillaient plus fort qu'à l'école secondaire et que celle-ci ne les avait pas préparés de façon adéquate à l'université. Le plus grand besoin auquel les étudiants ont dû s'ajuster, c'est au montant de travail, à sa difficulté, au stress et aux méthodes d'enseignement. Les étudiants variaient considérablement dans leurs réponses sur la satisfaction de leur attente et sur le temps nécessaire pour qu'ils se sentent à l'aise.

Concern is commonly expressed about the rate of attrition in university. This rate is by far the highest in the first year of studies. What are students' expectations and aspirations when they first go to university? Do they go to university unprepared for what they are about to undertake? Do they get involved in the many extracurricular activities available? To what specific aspects of university life do they have trouble adjusting? Can and should universities be of more help to first-year students? These are only a few of the questions related to attrition which American researchers have studied and discussed. The considerable interest in this area has been recently manifested in the holding of international conferences on the Freshman Year at Columbia (South Carolina) and Newcastle-on-Tyne (England) in 1986, and at Columbia (South Carolina) and Irvine (California) in early 1987, with another planned for Southampton (England) in July 1987. Further, Ernest Boyer (1987), of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the U.S., has deplored the discontinuity between schools and higher education and the mismatch between faculty expectations and students' academic preparation. He recommended "formation of a national panel to study all aspects of the high school-college transition" (p. 4).

Although the same issues are relevant in Canada, where attrition rates are thought to be as high as in the U.S., few Canadian studies have explored these matters. Sensing a need to know more about the school-university transition, we decided to survey incoming students at a large Canadian university.

Expectations of University

For many high school graduates, the university presents an unknown world about which they have varying expectations and aspirations. Many are eager and enthusiastic, others are wary and still others have no idea of what it will be like.

Those who have relatives or friends who have attended or who are attending are usually better prepared for the realities of university life. When Trent (1965-66) asked high school students across the U.S. what they expected out of college, he found that they said little more than that they expected to study harder and to have the opportunity to meet friends.

Many students expect to do as well if not better at university than they did in high school. Several studies (MacNaughton, 1966; Pervin, 1966; Sussmann, 1960) of students entering U.S. colleges or universities found that high percentages of these students expected to be in the top half of their classes. Students are not always aware of or prepared for the competition for top grades. For example, Lokitz and Sprandel (1976) quoted one student as saying, "my calculus course – I expected it to be as hard as it is but I didn't expect as many kids to be as good in it as they are" (p. 275).

Preparation for University

Adjustment and academic success in the first year are closely related to how well prepared students are when they arrive at university. Lehmann and Dressel (1962) found that students entering Michigan State University were unclear about the academic demands and social life on campus. Geer (1964) and Becker (1966) found that, prior to attending the University of Kansas, students had little idea of class scheduling or of the numbers of organizations and activities which were available to them. In a study conducted by Townsend (1956), nearly half of the respondents of the 27 participating U.S. colleges and universities thought that their high school preparation was good or excellent. However, many also commented on the need for training in communication skills, particularly writing and oral skills.

Goals in Attending

Although students have various reasons for attending university, the primary goals relate to the type of education desired. Feldman and Newcomb (1969) summarized the findings of a number of studies in which U.S. freshman students rated or ranked the importance of various goals. Many of the studies cited (e.g., Rose, 1964; Stanfield, 1965; Weiss, 1964) found that vocational training was the most important goal for first-year students, followed by acquisition of a basic general education. In other studies (DiRenzo, 1965; Gaff, 1965) the reverse order was found, i.e., a basic general education was rated as the most important goal. Differences often existed among individual colleges participating in the same study. A recent survey by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program ("Most of this year's freshmen," 1986) of more than 192,000 U.S. freshmen found the following to be rated as "very important" reasons for deciding to go to college: to be able to get a better job (83%); to learn more about things that interest me (74%); to be able to make more money (70%); and to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas (61%).

Choice of University

Selection of a university may involve many factors. Academic considerations might include standards, reputation and curriculum of the institution. The relative size, location, cost of tuition and financial assistance available are practical considerations. Students are also greatly influenced by parents, siblings, high school teachers, guidance counsellors and friends who are already in attendance or who are planning to attend. Other factors which might be considered include the social climate, religious and ethical values, the athletic and recreational programs offered, and various clubs and organizations which exist. Becker et al. (1968) found that students interviewed prior to attending the University of Kansas most often cited academic excellence as the criterion upon which their choice was based. In a longitudinal study of 10,000 students from 37 U.S. high schools, Trent (1965-66) reported that most students chose their university or college primarily because of proximity. Peer popularity and a "generally ill-conceived notion" (p. 9) of the school's prestige were cited next. The U.S. survey conducted by the Co-operative Institutional Research Program ("Most of this year's freshmen," 1986) found that the following aspects were noted as "very important" in selecting the college attended: good academic reputation (55%); graduates get good jobs (46%); graduates go to top graduate schools (26%); and good social reputation (23%).

Involvement in Activities

An important part of university life is social integration through participation in extracurricular activities. Numerous opportunities exist for those wishing to participate in sporting events, clubs, cultural activities and social events, and students sometimes have high expectations about involvement in these activities. Frantz (1966) found that one-third of the males entering the University of Iowa planned to participate in intercollegiate athletics, half of the new students planned to get involved in student government, and 90 intended to belong to academic clubs. Actual involvement has usually been found to be considerably less than this.

These findings pointed to a number of areas of interest which were subsequently examined in the study reported in this article.

The University of Alberta

The University of Alberta, located in the City of Edmonton, Alberta, was founded in 1908. It is the largest of three universities serving a province which, at the end of 1985, had a population of 2,360,000. In 1984-85, the University enrollment consisted of 20,900 full-time undergraduate students in 15 faculties, 2,600 full-time graduate students and 3,600 part-time students.

METHODOLOGY

An advisory committee was formed consisting of people from various campus offices which dealt directly with students. A six-page questionnaire was devised covering issues which the literature and personal knowledge revealed to be

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage Frequency Distributions of the
Respondents by Faculty and Sex

Faculty	Males		Females		Total	
	n	%Tm	n	%Tf	n	%Tt
Arts	58	18.1	120	37.5	178	27.8
Business	43	13.4	40	12.5	83	12.9
Education	21	6.5	72	22.5	93	14.5
Engineering	111	34.6	10	3.1	121	18.9
Science	88	27.4	78	24.4	166	25.9
Total	321	50.1	320	49.9	641	100.0

%Tm = percentage of the total male respondents in each faculty.

%Tf = percentage of the total female respondents in each faculty.

%Tt = percentage of the total respondents in each faculty.

important and of interest. The questionnaire was sent to all new students (N = 937) in the Faculties of Arts, Business, Education, Engineering, and Science who came to the University of Alberta directly from Alberta high schools in the fall of 1984. It was mailed to students at the end of February 1985 and follow-up letters were sent in the last weeks of March and April.

A total of 641 usable questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 68%. The sample comprised 50.1% males and 49.9% females. Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample by sex and faculty.

RESULTS

The figures reported in the tables are for the total sample. Findings from analyses by sex and by faculty are discussed where differences were noticeable.

Influences upon Decisions to Attend

The distribution and the means of numerical responses reported in Table 2 show that "family members" was by far the most important influence upon the decision to attend this University (a mean of 3.9 on a five-point scale; 39% rated "very important"). The next two most important factors were reputation of the university (mean of 3.4; 22% "very important") and proximity of the university (mean of 3.2; 29% "very important"). The influence of senior high school teachers (guidance counsellors and others) and of university personnel (visits by staff and students to

Table 2
 Percentage Frequency Distributions and Means of Importance of Factors
 Influencing Decision to Attend the University of Alberta

Factor	Percentage Frequency					Mean	n	Not applicable f % (n+f)	
	Not at all Important		Very Important						
	1	2	3	4	5				
Family members	7	6	17	31	39	3.9	632	-	-
Reputation of the U of A	12	8	29	30	22	3.4	634	-	-
Proximity of the U of A	27	9	15	21	29	3.2	628	-	-
Friends who were planning to attend	25	14	23	26	12	2.8	607	30	5
Friends who were already attending	26	14	26	22	11	2.8	580	59	9
University Orientation Days	31	13	21	21	14	2.7	553	79	12
U of A publications	30	21	23	20	6	2.5	625	-	-
Cost of attending the U of A	33	20	25	11	11	2.5	629	-	-
Other high school teacher(s)	35	26	24	12	3	2.2	608	-	-
Student Orientation Services	48	17	18	13	4	2.1	519	119	19
High school guidance counsellor	50	21	18	10	2	1.9	618	23	4
Other publications (non-U of A)	51	21	19	8	2	1.9	616	-	-
Visit by U of A staff to high school	53	25	15	6	1	1.8	492	144	22
Visit by student representative to high school	65	20	10	3	1	1.6	442	195	30
U of A staff you know	75	10	7	5	3	1.5	403	228	36

Percentages shown under the 1-5 scale are based upon those answering 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5. The percentage shown under "Not applicable" is based upon the total number, (n + f), answering either on the 1-5 scale or "Not applicable."

school, and staff known by students) were rated quite low. Other factors which students listed as being important were the programs offered, interest in pursuing a career or occupation, personal desire and ambition. Female students rated nearly every factor as slightly more influential than did male students. Few major differences were noted among the five faculties.

Importance of Goals

Table 3 shows that the most important goal of those listed on the questionnaire was clearly "to prepare for an interesting career," with a mean of 4.6 on a five-point scale; 68% chose it as "very important." Next most important were "to obtain a well-paid job" (mean of 4.3; 55% "very important"), "to learn more about certain topics of special interest to you" (mean of 4.3; 50% "very important"), and "to

Table 3
Percentage Frequency Distributions and Means of Importance
of Specified Goals in Attending University

Goal	Percentage Frequency					Mean	n
	Not at all important		Very important				
	1	2	3	4	5		
To prepare for an interesting career	1	1	4	26	68	4.6	640
To learn more about certain topics of special interest to you	1	2	12	35	50	4.3	639
To obtain a well-paid job	3	3	14	26	55	4.3	639
To obtain a good general education	2	4	16	37	41	4.1	640
To learn how to think and study	3	10	31	32	24	3.6	639
To meet new people	6	12	34	31	18	3.4	640
To avoid unemployment	28	14	19	20	19	2.9	639
To prepare for further formal education	32	15	15	13	25	2.8	540
To please your parents	21	20	28	19	11	2.8	640
To remain with your high school friends	55	25	16	3	1	1.7	638
Nothing better to do	67	15	10	5	4	1.6	637

obtain a good general education” (mean of 4.1; 41% “very important”). The only other goals which had means higher than the scale mean of 3 were “to learn how to think and study” and “to meet new people”. Very little importance was given to “remaining with high school friends.” Other goals listed by students included “to improve myself,” to become highly educated, “to prove to myself I can succeed,” to uphold family tradition, and to have fun. Female students placed slightly more emphasis upon topics of interest, learning to think and study, and meeting new people, whereas male students placed slightly more emphasis on obtaining a well-paid job. Arts students placed relatively less emphasis upon obtaining a well-paid job (Arts mean 3.9; other faculties mean 4.4) while Education and Engineering students placed far less emphasis than did the others on preparing for further formal education (mean of 2.2; other faculties mean 3.1).

Preparation for University

As Table 4 indicates, the respondents generally perceived that they were best prepared for university in reading skills (mean of 3.6 on a five-point scale), listening skills (mean of 3.6), and taking notes (mean of 3.5). Means greater than

Table 4
 Percentage Frequency Distributions and Means of Perceptions
 of Preparedness for University in Specified Areas

Area	Percentage Frequency					Mean	n
	Very poorly				Very well		
	1	2	3	4	5		
Reading skills	2	11	31	35	21	3.6	636
Listening skills	1	9	33	44	14	3.6	636
Taking notes	5	14	29	36	17	3.5	638
Attitudes toward studies	8	14	29	33	15	3.3	637
Knowledge of the subjects studied	5	12	41	35	8	3.3	636
Speaking skills	7	16	35	28	14	3.2	638
Writing skills	6	16	38	31	10	3.2	638
Working in a team	9	17	36	29	10	3.1	631
Study skills	11	25	34	23	8	2.9	637
Library skills	19	29	28	17	7	2.6	637
Budgeting time	18	34	30	16	3	2.5	638

the scale mean of 3 were also obtained for attitudes towards studies (3.3), knowledge of the subjects studied (3.3), speaking skills (3.2), writing skills (3.2), and working in a team (3.1). Study skills, library skills and budgeting time all had overall means less than the scale mean of 3. On average, only about 12% selected "very well" to describe their levels of preparation. Female students' perceptions of their preparedness for university in academic areas was generally higher than it was for males, with the means commonly differing by 0.3. Arts students clearly had the highest percentages responding "very well" for preparation in writing skills, listening skills, and reading skills. Education and Business students rated their preparation in study skills somewhat higher than did the other students. Engineering students had the lowest ratings for preparedness in listening skills, reading skills, and taking notes. The highest rating on preparation for working in a team was given by Education students, and on attitudes to studies by Business students.

Many students commented on their lack of preparedness for attending university in terms of both ineffective academic preparation as well as insufficient information on the realities of university life. This was illustrated by one student who wrote, "The high school I attended last year did very little to prepare me as to what to expect for homework, self-discipline, or even professor instruction." Another student suggested, "The bare essentials of writing is another area where high schools fall short in preparing students for practical university English." Although the University has a very active liaison with the high schools, some students suggested that more University representatives be sent to explain to prospective students what they should expect with regard to workload, study habits, exams, and activities.

Expectations and Experiences at University

Students were asked to compare their expectations before attending with their actual experiences after arriving on campus. A large majority of respondents (85%) took the opportunity to make comments.

Many students compared the differences they found between high school and university. Most differences related to the comparatively large campus and class sizes, inadequate preparation in high school, larger/harder workloads, the difficulty of getting good grades, and differences between school and university teachers. Some of the more positive comments about university as compared with high school were as follows:

The atmosphere is exhilarating and I find the school an exciting place to be. It has re-awoken my personal interest in studying and school which I lost in high school.

Before attending the U of A, I thought that it would be very difficult and tedious. Now that I'm actually here, I find that I've never enjoyed getting an education as I do now. The courses are great and my professors are wonderful. I was surprised how much fun the U of A is.

I've become so much aware of the outside world – high school is like prison – you're locked away. I especially enjoy the lectures on research and new findings in this world.

About 7% actually stated that their experiences approached or met their expectations. Some students felt they knew what to expect as they had friends or relatives already attending. Others said they found the adjustment harder or longer than they expected, while still others found it easier.

By far the largest number of comments were directed at the workload of university courses. Although the majority of these comments reflected the increased or harder workload, for example, "I realized a great deal of work was involved but I never dreamed it would suffocate me," many others found it less difficult or less intense than expected.

Marks and exams were also a focus of students' comments. Many of these reflected the students' expectations of achieving as highly, or at least as well, as in high school. Some students indicated that they had performed well in high school

with little effort, but that the situation was much different at university where the work was harder and the competition stiffer. Students also voiced complaints about the nine-point grading system used at this University, most having been accustomed to percentage grades. They also complained about hard, stressful exams: "I am shocked at the amount of stress I experienced during exams."

A substantial number of comments noting differences between expectations and actual occurrence were directed at the methods of instruction and quality of the teaching staff. Opposing points of view were commonly expressed: more student-teacher contact versus less contact than expected; personal versus impersonal teachers; and teachers who were more versus less friendly and helpful than anticipated. One student wrote, "I expected large classes but was very surprised with the 'easy-to-talk-to' profs. They are excellent regarding problems and it's nice to know that they're people too." Another felt that, because of the lack of student-teacher contact, he was virtually taking his courses by correspondence.

Frequent mention was made of the unexpectedly large size of the campus and classes, and some students commented on the number of people on campus. Freshmen often expected to see high school friends and also to make new friends; both happened less frequently than anticipated. Other comments reflected differences between their expectations and observations of the ages of students on campus, and the types and friendliness of the people encountered. Many also commented on the impersonality of the campus, as one student noted, "I was surprised at the 'coldness' of the campus and of a lot of staff on campus. One tends to feel very 'alone' even if one is with friends." This type of comment was usually made by students who had attended small high schools outside Edmonton; there they knew most of their fellow students. Those commenting on the social life on campus expressed varying opinions. Although some discovered more activities than expected, others found it harder to get involved because of commitment to their studies or because the events were not adequately publicized. Other aspects discussed included expectations regarding competition, study habits, counselling services, freedom and independence, discipline, and responsibilities.

Some comments reflected students' doubts about the value of their freshman programs. As one student remarked, "I thought I'd figure out what I wanted to do (which career) after my first year, but I still don't." Another complained, "I expected more courses dealing with my specific career choice and was surprised, not to mention disappointed, when the majority of the courses were just general."

Some students also indicated that they found their first year stressful: "I didn't expect university to be such a test of personal strength." One student from a small town said, "the transition from high school to U of A is quite a stressful and terrifying experience, and I was ready to go home after registration." However, other students were very enthusiastic and obviously had no problems adjusting to university life; this was illustrated by one student who wrote that, "The University is everything I expected. Attending the U of A was the best decision I could have made."

Actual and Expected Performance

When asked to compare actual academic performance with that which they had anticipated, only 11% of the 541 respondents who made this comparison reported levels of accomplishment that were “better than expected.” A large proportion (48%) felt that they were doing “less well than expected” while 41% indicated that they were achieving “about as expected.” A further 100 respondents (16% of total sample) stated they had not known what to expect. A slightly higher percentage of female students than male students reported that they were performing beyond their expectations (11% F, 8% M). However, far more students of both sexes perceived that they were doing less well than expected. The highest percentages of students who perceived that they were achieving “better than expected” occurred in Education (17%) and Arts (16%). Over half of the students in Engineering and Science thought they were doing “less well than expected.”

Comparison of Workloads

Participants were asked to compare how hard they were working at the U of A as compared to high school, using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“not nearly as hard”) to 5 (“much harder”). These first-year students generally felt that they were working harder: nearly 72% chose a response of either 4 or 5. A larger proportion of males than females (77% M and 66% F chose 4 or 5) felt that they were working harder at university than at high school. The responses of Engineering students clearly reflected a perception that their workloads had increased to a greater extent than for students in any other faculty (Engineering mean 4.5; other faculties mean 3.9).

Interest, Enjoyment, and Satisfaction

Participants were generally finding their studies interesting, with 60% choosing 4 or 5 on the five-point interest scale; the mean was 3.6. Similar distributions were obtained for enjoyment in attending university (62% chose 4 or 5 on the five-point enjoyment scale; the mean was 3.7) and for overall satisfaction with the university experience (53% chose 4 or 5 on the five-point satisfaction scale; the mean was 3.5). Female students tended to show slightly higher levels of interest, enjoyment, and satisfaction than did male students. Arts had the highest percentage (22) of students who rated their studies as “very interesting”, whereas Science students showed the lowest rating for overall satisfaction with the university experience (mean of 3.2).

Involvement in Activities

Most of the respondents (72%) were not employed while attending classes. The remainder were employed for between 1 and 32 hours per week, with about 13% working more than 10 hours per week. Respondents were also asked how much

Table 5

Percentage Frequency Distributions and Means of Perceived Extent of
Need to Adjust to Specified Aspects of University Attendance

Aspect	Percentage Frequency					Mean	n	Still adjusting
	Not at all		Great deal					
	1	2	3	4	5			
Amount of work	3	7	18	34	38	4.0	611	19
Registration procedures	6	13	17	27	38	3.8	626	6
Stress	6	10	22	37	25	3.7	603	17
Difficulty of the work	4	11	29	37	19	3.6	628	11
Methods of instruction	5	16	26	35	19	3.5	623	10
Other administrative procedures	6	15	32	29	19	3.4	607	9
Parking	19	16	11	16	38	3.4	141	3
Moving away from home	13	15	26	22	23	3.3	210	3
Using the library system	9	19	29	27	17	3.3	579	19
9-point grading system	12	17	28	28	16	3.2	619	9
Size of the university	11	24	25	23	17	3.1	634	6
Large size of your classes	13	22	26	24	16	3.1	636	3
Relating to staff	14	22	32	20	12	3.0	594	13
Lack of funds	24	21	22	19	15	2.8	613	8
Losing touch with high school friends	24	26	23	17	10	2.6	621	8
Transportation to campus	35	20	19	14	12	2.5	630	3
Facilities for studying on campus	20	36	28	13	3	2.4	616	6
Making friends	27	30	26	12	6	2.4	622	8
Lack of supervision	32	26	23	13	7	2.4	627	5
Study facilities at your residence	39	22	20	12	7	2.3	598	4
Working with other students	26	38	27	8	2	2.2	619	5

time they spent per week in each of five on-campus activities. The most time, an average of 3.7 hours per week, was spent in "discussing academic matters with other students or staff members." Students indicated that they had little involvement in extracurricular physical education activities, extracurricular academic and cultural events (e.g., lectures, concerts), and student clubs.

Adjustment to Specific Aspects

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had to adjust to various aspects of university life. Table 5 shows that students perceived the most need to adjust in the following five areas: amount of work (mean of 4.0 on a five-point scale), registration procedures (mean of 3.8), stress (mean of 3.7), difficulty of work (mean of 3.6), and methods of instruction (mean of 3.5). Other adjustment aspects for which means above the midpoint of 3 were obtained were administrative procedures, parking, moving away from home, using the library, the nine-point grading system, size of the University, and the large size of classes. Education students perceived a greater need to adjust to the size of the university and to registration procedures, whereas Business students showed a greater need to adjust to class sizes. Engineering students indicated the greatest need to adjust to the amount and difficulty of work. Engineering and Science students showed the greatest need to adjust to different methods of instruction.

Feeling "At Ease" at University

In response to the question concerning how long it took them to feel as much at ease at the U of A as in their last year of high school, nearly half (49%) selected two months or less. A further 17% stated that they were still not comfortable in their new environment. The University was not generally perceived to do well in helping new students to feel at ease. On the five-point scale from 1 ("very poorly") to 5 ("very well"), 36% chose the midpoint of 3, while nearly 47% chose either 1 or 2: less than 3% chose "very well." The frequency distributions were very similar for the responses of students when they were classified either by sex or faculty.

Respondents were also asked to indicate "ways in which the U of A should do more to help students feel at ease." About 68% of those surveyed responded to this question. Some students actually stated either that the U of A could do no more than it already did or that it was not the university's responsibility to help students feel at ease: "I feel adjusting to school life is a student's responsibility and I feel the U of A is doing a fairly good job in its efforts to help students." A substantial percentage of students commented on registration, suggesting either that procedures be simplified or changed or that more information be provided in the registration booklet. One student remarked, "Change your registration method. It is the most alienating, frustrating experience I had in my first year." As indicated in Table 5, registration procedures was an area where students found the adjustment to be particularly difficult. (A new phone-in registration procedure introduced in 1986 has solved most of these problems.) Twelve students suggested the use of a "buddy system" for registration and/or the first week of classes to help freshmen to become oriented. A few students commented favorably on the University's Orientation Days; others suggested that it be extended or that more activities be added. Still others proposed that more guidance and counselling was needed for program and course selection. About 8% of the sample thought there

should be better ways of informing students about the services available, the activities on campus, administrative procedures, and where to go for assistance. Several students suggested that better signs and maps would help students to find their way around campus. Guidebooks, manuals, and seminars on what and how to study, how to manage time, and how to adjust to a different educational environment were mentioned as ways that would help freshman students.

More social functions for freshmen, particularly within faculties, were suggested. Students thought that more effort should be made to encourage students to participate in these events. Some students, particularly those from outside Edmonton, stated that it was difficult to meet people. This was especially true when their classes were large. Surprisingly, although many students commented on the size of the campus and their classes, only a small number of students noted that smaller classes would help make them feel more at ease.

Almost 9% of the sample made comments concerning instructors and how they could help students adapt to a new learning style. Most of these remarks dealt with the following suggestions: having professors ease students into the workload; providing more information on procedures, exams, and courses; encouraging more student-instructor contact; and being more aware of students' problems and encouraging them to seek assistance. As one student put it, "Profs should be more 'student friendly'." Others suggested that evaluations of instructors should be made available to students.

DISCUSSION

This study obtained results which supported those of previous researchers, while at the same time providing Canadian data for an area in which U.S. researchers have been predominant. The information was of considerable interest to the University's administrators, particularly those in offices dealing directly with students. In one instance, the results of the study have been incorporated into a student-sponsored orientation seminar.

All students in the study were residents of Alberta and almost two-thirds of them were living at home. This not only seemed to influence students' decision to attend this University but it also probably helped to make their transition easier. Local students would be less likely to experience the added pressures of adjusting to a new city, new friends, and new living arrangements and their associated costs.

As has been found in previous studies (e.g., Cooperative Institutional Research Program, 1986; Selvin, 1963; Stanfield, 1965), students clearly indicated that their personal goals in attending university were career-oriented. However, Feldman and Newcomb (1969), in reviewing a number of studies in which students rated the goals of a college education, found that by their final year, the percentage of students rating vocational training as important had decreased, whereas the importance of a basic general education had increased. In a planned follow-up of students in their second year, the authors will again ask them about their goals to see if a similar trend appears to be occurring.

Students obviously had diverse experiences and perceptions during their first year, and differences were also found among students by their faculty of enrollment. The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were enjoying university life and were satisfied overall with their experiences. The biggest adjustment was to the amount and difficulty of their course work and the accompanying stress. Perhaps "learning to cope" is part of the process en route to obtaining a degree.

First-year students apparently spent most of their time in activities related to their studies. The majority were not employed in jobs but seemed to spend little time participating in any extracurricular activities on campus. Were students dedicating their time to their studies because of the competition for good grades, or were they unaware of the activities available? The follow-up study will examine whether students in their second year become more involved in extracurricular activities.

The written comments of students showed where their real concerns lay and how they thought these might be resolved. The University already sends personnel and pamphlets to schools, and holds Orientation Days for high school students during the year. However, high school teachers and guidance counsellors probably should assume greater responsibility for preparing students who plan to attend university by ensuring that they possess certain academic skills and by advising them on vocational options, career goals, and the differences between high school and university. As Taagepera (1987) emphasized, the universities cannot in the freshman year overcome all of the preparation deficiencies of secondary education through various orientation and other procedures; the schools must be cooperating partners in this endeavor to assist students with the transition. Nevertheless, the University could also make improvements by encouraging staff to be more friendly and helpful, by having better ways of informing new students about its facilities, services, procedures and activities, and by holding more social functions. Boyer (1987) recommended several remedial measures including better orientation and more monitoring, reporting, and advising.

Faculty-student interaction has been found to be very important for integrating students into university life (e.g., Pascarella and Terenzini, 1977). Tinto (1982) suggested that this involves both academic and informal social contact, and recommended that effective faculty members be assigned to teach large first-year courses and be available on a regular basis for advice and consultation. He also suggested the use of student centres for lectures and social gatherings where faculty and students can interact in small groups. A few students in this study made similar suggestions, such as hosting a "meet the profs week" early in the school year.

Apart from the obvious measures mentioned above, the most successful approach to the problems of transition probably includes the offering of a course during the first few weeks which specifically deals with aspects of "the freshman experience." Some notable examples, which were described recently at the 1987 National Conference on The Freshman Year Experience (Irvine, California),

occur at the Pennsylvania State University, the University of South Carolina, and the University of Southern California. Gordon and Grites (1984), after recording that freshman seminar courses are not new, as over 100 U.S. institutions offered such courses in 1928, listed these potential course topics – understanding the value of a degree, academic information and planning, learning skills, university policies and procedures, university resources, personal-social concerns, and career information and planning. Such courses do not appear to be common in Canada, and their implementation is strongly recommended.

Studies have shown that the school-university transition generates similar problems in different Western countries. That is, freshmen in Canada, the U.S., Britain, and Australia, for example, experience difficulties in adjusting to matters such as being away from home, large classes, resocialization, increased workload, increased work difficulty, and performances below their expectations. Therefore, we can conclude that the secondary-postsecondary progression will always require some substantial personal adjustment, regardless of country, the type of university or college, and the measures taken by these postsecondary institutions. This does not imply that institutions should not keep trying to minimize the personal problems of freshmen; it does mean that they should try to remove the sources of dysfunctional consequences of their procedures to as great a degree as is possible, and that common measures in different countries may have similar results in spite of substantial cultural differences.

Furthermore, although the findings provided in this article relate to first-year students at one Canadian university, they probably have a considerable degree of generalizability to other institutions. In this respect, they may provide a basis for other studies, some of which could be replicative whereas others could be of a more policy-oriented nature. A major study of attrition was scheduled to be conducted by Gilbert at the University of Guelph in the fall of 1986. First-year students will be asked questions regarding their backgrounds, expectations, attitudes and intentions at the start of the academic year; at a later time they will be asked about their actual experiences and performances at university. All of this information should help Canadian universities to make the first-year experience more rewarding and satisfying, and to assist in reducing unwarranted attrition while maintaining high standards.

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