

Student Retention and Diversity Study
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
June 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the 2008-2009 academic year, 508 UTC students completed the Student Retention and Diversity Survey, mostly by telephone interview, providing extensive quantitative data analysis on a range of issues from academics, to housing, student activities, and multiculturalism and diversity. Additionally, 16 students participated in one of four focus group discussions, eliciting rich qualitative data shedding more light on these important issues. This Summary highlights the overall findings of both the survey and focus groups, and includes important multicultural and group differences where applicable. An extensive review of these differences can be found in the Results Section of the Report. Strengths, or areas to maintain, and weaknesses, or areas to improve, are noted in a concluding section with selected recommendations.

As in the larger report body, results included in this Summary are combined for freshmen and sophomores, and for juniors and seniors.

Choosing UTC

In both the survey and the focus groups, the majority of participants indicated that attending college was a norm for them, a stepping stone in continuing their education and moving toward a promising career and future. They described being motivated by their parents/caretakers and the knowledge that if they did not go to college opportunities would be limited. When asked why they chose to attend UTC in particular, the two predominant reasons given in both the surveys and focus groups were 'location' and 'cost/affordability.' Interestingly, the latter was not dictated by income level. Two other top reasons students selected on the survey is that UTC 'had my major' and that they had 'interest in specific majors or opportunities associated with UTC.' In the focus group sessions, participants also noted that they chose UTC because of the smaller size of the campus and its more intimate atmosphere. The survey indicated that interest in campus organizations, campus diversity, and family did not play much of a role in most students' decision to attend UTC.

Recruitment Issues

Few respondents reported that they had been recruited to attend UTC (12.1%). Of those, a third were recruited when UTC visited their high school, a quarter received a letter in a package from UTC, another quarter indicated that they were recruited for sports, and one in five were recruited for their academic ability. Very few attended a college recruitment event. Further, White students were more likely to report being recruited than ethnic minority students, and respondents without a disability were more likely to report being recruited than those who reported a disability.

Adjusting to UTC

In the focus groups, students were asked what has been most helpful in adjusting to UTC. Across the board, peers were cited as the most helpful in this way. Freshmen/sophomore students noted how peers positively impact their adjustment to the university classroom, and junior/senior respondents discussed making new friends as a way to adjust to the campus environment.

Freshmen/sophomore students also noted that their professors were a major asset in helping them adjust, especially those who extend their help beyond the classroom. Social organizations and university services were also discussed by freshmen/sophomore students as helpful in adjusting, an important finding in light of the low involvement in social organizations and the low usage of campus services reported on the survey. In addition to peers, junior/senior students noted that having assistance of advisors available provided them a sense of comfort. They also specified that having the common goal of earning a degree and quality education provided them a sense of connection between students.

Participants were also asked what has been difficult or problematic in their adjustment. Again, two different sets of answers emerged. Freshmen/sophomore students discussed two issues related to money - parking and housing. Students were frustrated over the lack of parking availability and the expense of parking, including parking decals and parking tickets incurred from not being able to find an appropriate place to park. Similarly, they were disappointed with UTC Place, noting that the repairs and maintenance issues make the pricing of that housing community unfair. Freshmen/sophomore students also described limited class space as a difficulty, noting the hassles of trying to get into their major-related courses, and the fact that being a freshman or sophomore worsened the problem. Conversely, junior/senior students were more concerned with the bureaucratic hassles and 'red tape' involved in transferring to UTC from a community college. Students also discussed one disadvantage of being a commuter student - less involvement in campus activities. However, they attributed this mainly to poor publicity of events.

Preparation for Future Job/Career

Responses on the survey and in the focus groups indicated that, in general, students feel they are advised well in regard to both their majors and their future jobs and career options, agreeing that, among other things, their advisors know them well, are available to talk with them, and that the relationships are good. However, survey results suggest that freshmen/sophomore students may be less knowledgeable about the advisement process than junior/senior students. Also, in the focus groups, some participants indicated wanting more time and direction from their advisors, noting that they sometimes feeling 'processed' ('just try to get you in and out') and sometimes are advised to take courses that are not required of their major ('wasting time and money').

Other discussions uncovering students' concerns about being prepared for their future emerged. Freshmen/sophomore students questioned the necessity of general education courses, some noting that they are not useful. This group of students also expressed considerable concern over the current economic situation and wondered whether there will be a job/career waiting for them when they graduate. Some are worried that their major areas may be too specialized, leading to an expensive education, but unattainable career. Junior/senior students, on the other hand, wanted a more structured curriculum with a detailed layout, including being advised early to prepare for graduate school and being required to complete an internship.

Internships were deemed especially beneficial in preparation for careers by all focus group participants, but they noted that most available internships are too specialized for certain majors, or are not advertised. This coincides with survey results indicating that only about a quarter of respondents reported having an opportunity to complete an internship related to their major or

career aspirations. Similarly, a majority of students (86.8%) agreed that more internship opportunities would make UTC especially attractive to attend.

Academic Issues

Participants were asked a variety of questions about academic issues, such as major expectations of their professors, ways to make coursework more interesting and intellectually stimulating, satisfying and problematic experiences related to their coursework, and about studying abroad and service learning experiences and opportunities. When asked on the survey what their major expectations of their professors were, an overwhelming majority of respondents said they believed it was ‘to help build the student’s intellectual abilities’ (93.8%) and ‘to make the course interesting’ (92.0%). Another sizable majority (85.1%) felt that professors should provide them with broad information apart from the text (85.1%), use modern technology in the classroom and in assignments (76.9%), and help students find their career niche (73.2%). Interestingly, though still a large amount, least expected from their professors is ‘to make learning fun and easy’ (71.4%), suggesting that students find learning important and value their education more than they want an easy ride through school. However, it should be noted that students’ expectations of their professors varied by race/ethnicity, gender, and class ranking.

Participants in the focus groups were asked to discuss ways in which their courses could be made more interesting and intellectually stimulating. Most students desired more open class discussion, explaining that this stimulates intellectual conversation. Similar to previous responses, freshmen/sophomore students again pointed to professors as a key component. This group noted that an interested and engaged professor makes the class itself interesting and engaging. The focus groups comprised of juniors and seniors suggested that better facilities would be useful, noting that old run-down facilities are distracting and unaccommodating in the learning environment.

Focus groups participants were also asked to share their most satisfying and problematic experiences related to their coursework at UTC. A majority of freshmen/sophomore students indicated that their professors are a part of their most satisfying experiences, especially if they are helpful toward learning the material, and enjoyable, which adds to a positive classroom experience. Junior/senior participants discussed gaining applicable knowledge in the classroom as particularly satisfying, as well as the joy of seeing the finished product of their labor and the satisfaction of getting a good grade. One student noted that she ‘finally’ found a good math teacher, and this made a huge difference in her classroom experience.

Among problematic experiences, some freshmen and sophomore students cited concerns related to having to take remedial courses in math, and the difficulties they had experienced in successfully completing these courses. When this area was probed further in the focus groups, students indicated there is concern with math instruction in some courses, and suggested a need for changes in the teaching of the basic math classes that would strengthen students’ ability to pass these courses without repeated attempts. Students also were concerned about having to take remedial courses for which they received no course credit, and felt that taking remedial courses should be a personal decision. If required to take the courses, they felt credit should be given. Other topics discussed as problematic for students were taking courses from less well-credentialed instructors, and difficulties experienced with some international instructors whose accents limited verbal comprehension. Among junior/senior students a different set of

problematic experiences was noted. Students mentioned a lack of structure in some of their courses, and many cited the cost of textbooks. In some cases students stated that they delayed purchasing all needed books at the beginning of the semester due to the cost, causing them to get behind in their coursework.

Participants were also asked about their studying abroad and service learning experiences and opportunities. Although only a small percentage of survey respondents reported participating in a study abroad program at UTC (2.4%), over half of the students indicated interest in doing so (55.7%) and a majority of respondents indicated that more international education programs (71%) and more support for international education programs (69.6%) would make UTC especially attractive to attend. Those who had a study abroad experience rated it as 'excellent' or 'very good' suggesting that this type of opportunity should be made more available and feasible for students. Students noted that a semester session would work best and the main difficulties with participating in a study abroad program are lack of time and money.

Students were also asked if they would be interested in participating in a service learning project as part of a grade, and three-fourths said they would (76%). Further, three-fourths of respondents felt that service-learning based courses (74.8%), more opportunities to be engaged in community volunteerism (76.8%), and more opportunities to do community research (74%) would make UTC especially attractive to attend. In the focus groups, students were a little ambiguous about the exact definition of service learning, but once provided a definition, they were generally supportive of the idea. They suggested that highlighting the importance of fieldwork as part of the overall learning experience and offering credit for participating would make the opportunity more appealing to students. Time and transportation were deemed challenges to completing a service learning project.

Campus Involvement

In both the focus groups and on the survey respondents indicated low campus involvement. When asked what groups they are involved in, about one in four indicated that they were involved in some type of organization (28.7%), with slightly less specifying involvement in interest or departmental clubs (23.9%). Only about one in ten claimed involvement in fraternities or sororities (11.9%) and faith-based organizations (10%). One in twenty were part of an honor society. Further, the majority of students said that more ways for students to become involved on campus (79.8%), more campus entertainment options (72.6%), and a set time for organization meetings during the day with no classes meeting (68.8%) would make UTC especially attractive to attend.

The focus group discussions shed more light on this issue. All groups agreed that there was not much student involvement on campus. Participants suggested that lack of advertisement and time constraints serve as obstacles to some student involvement. The freshmen/sophomore focus groups also pointed out that GPA requirements limit involvement in some campus activities. Junior/senior students felt that there is a lack of diverse activities on campus, which may be attributable to the limited advertisement of organizations and activities available. This group also suggested that most campus involvement is with fraternities and sororities, and that these are the same people involved in other organizations and activities, with creates an intimidating atmosphere for people not involved in Greek-letter organizations. Similarly, they noted that there

is a lack of diversity, and suggested that diverse organizations and events would be more appealing to them.

Diversity Issues

In general, students seemed to possess positive opinions about diversity and multiculturalism at UTC. Overall, students at UTC seem to agree that some forms of diversity are present, they hold positive attitudes toward multiculturalism, and they believe that diversity on campus improves the quality of education. However, notable amounts of students indicated that they were unsure about some diversity related issues. For example, a third to a quarter of respondents were unsure whether UTC recognizes eminent leaders and alumni of color by naming buildings, scholarships, or lectureships in their honor and by awarding honorary degrees (33.5%), or if courses on race, culture, ethnicity, and other issues are regularly offered at UTC (29.8%), or if minorities feel comfortable at this university (28%), or if students are encouraged to join or form their own student organizations for support or celebrate their cultural heritage (26.4%). One in five did not know if women students have more opportunities than men at UTC (22.2%), if minority students have more opportunities than White students (20.2%), or if UTC has done a good job providing programs and activities that promote multicultural understanding (18%). Further, students disagreed to one positive diversity statement: 'diversity at UTC is one of the reasons why I chose to come here.' Of great importance, is that this is also the number one statement to which faculty, administrators, and staff disagreed in the 2009 UTC Faculty/Staff Worklife and Diversity Study recently completed at UTC. Whether or not these groups are indicating that UTC is not diverse enough for them or that diversity is not a factor they considered when coming here is unclear. Further investigation is recommended.

Though respondents had generally positive attitudes toward and opinions of diversity and multiculturalism, a third of the students surveyed reported hearing people on campus make insensitive or disparaging remarks about specific groups of people on campus. On average, administrators were believed to 'never' make disparaging remarks, but faculty were reported to 'seldom' make them about women, racial/ethnic minorities, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender persons, and persons of particular religious backgrounds. Students were reported to make these remarks most frequently. Specifically, students were reported to have 'occasionally' heard from other students insensitive or disparaging remarks about women, racial/ethnic minorities, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender persons. They also noted hearing remarks about the other five multicultural groups, though this was report to 'seldom' occur.

Also important, is that a quarter of the students surveyed reported being harassed in some way (e.g., insults, hate jokes, written comments, threats of physical violence, etc.) at some point at UTC, the majority who indicated so being women. Importantly, only a small percentage of those individuals who experienced harassment ever filed a complaint (7.8%). The top two group identities that students believed to be relevant in the harassment were race and sex/gender, with ethnicity and religion thought to play a role in slightly less of these incidents. Being gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender, low-income, or a person with a disability, did not seem to play much of a role in these incidents of harassment.

The focus groups provided more in-depth information about diversity on campus. Participants were asked what they believed to be the main diversity issues on campus, what have been the most positive things related to diversity that they have seen here at UTC, and the ways diversity might be increased at UTC. The main diversity issue discussed in all four groups is segregation in the cafeteria, which students felt uncomfortable with, desiring that this change. This issue is not a new one. Participants also noted their disappointment with the lack of diversity within the fraternities and sororities, one going as far as to suggest her 'mixed' roommate was not selected for a sorority because of race/ethnicity.

On a positive note, all groups of students mentioned UTC housing as a positive experience with diversity, forcing students, who would not otherwise, to interact with each other. They discussed the housing arrangement as an opportunity to willingly meet different individuals and learn more about each other. Focus group participants also suggested a few ways to increase diversity on campus. Freshmen/sophomore students felt that providing more multicultural events (e.g., the Oak Street Roast) could bring more diverse groups of people together, while junior/senior students suggested more student recruitment from abroad, increasing international representation at UTC.

Student Attrition

Over half of the respondents in this study reported knowing someone who had dropped out of college and a third felt that they wanted to leave/drop out of UTC at some point themselves. Nearly-three quarters, however, indicated that it was "not at all likely" they would drop out of UTC before they graduate. Students listed many reasons they believe others may drop out of college, but poor study habits was the number one response followed by inadequate time management. Lack of motivation and academic difficulty were listed as the top two reasons someone they knew dropped out of college. Interestingly, when asked why they thought about leaving themselves, the majority of students reported department/professor issues. The fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977)¹ dictates that people will attribute other peoples' failures to internal reasons (e.g., poor study habits or inadequate time management), while attributing their own inadequacies to external reasons (e.g., it was the department or my professor's fault), this psychological error clearly demonstrated here. However, respondents did confess lack of motivation as the second most predominant reason for considering dropping out, taking on some responsibility. Importantly, there were multicultural differences in this set of responses as well.

Strengths & Weaknesses of UTC

In the focus groups, students were asked what one thing about UTC they would change if they could and what one thing they would keep the same. All groups discussed the array of parking problems as a major weakness of the university that they would like to see remedied. Freshmen/sophomore groups also discussed limited housing as a result of the university's growing population, noting the dissatisfaction of some students forced to live in hotels because the university cannot accommodate them. Junior/senior students said that they would like to see

¹ Ross, L. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 10 (pp. 174–200). New York: Academic Press.

more transparency and accountability in regards to when and how university money is spent. They know how the money is coming in (e.g., tuition, parking tickets, etc.) but not where it goes. In looking at things that students felt should stay the same, the number one response among freshmen/sophomore students was tuition. This coincided with survey findings in which 'cost/affordability' is the number three reason students chose to attend UTC in the first place. Focus group participants elaborated that UTC is 'affordable' and 'works for what you need'. Junior/senior participants, however, said they like the small size of the campus best, as well as the faculty and staff. This also coincided with survey findings. A 'smaller campus' and 'professors' were among the top three things students said they like best about UTC. The number two thing was 'city of Chattanooga/location,' which makes sense as it is the number one reason they chose to attend UTC in the first place.

**Access to the full Student Retention and Diversity Study Report, Power Point Presentation, and Conclusions and Recommendations Summary, can be found by going to the UTC homepage and clicking the Strategic Plan link on the left side of the page. These documents are linked on the left side of the Strategic Plan page.