

Student Retention and Diversity Study
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
December 2011

Executive Summary

Study Background

The Student Retention and Diversity Study (SRDS) provided an opportunity to examine issues related to student life, diversity, and academics at UTC. The first phase was conducted in 2008, establishing baseline data that informed university decision-making and initiatives. The 2011 study allows a comparative analysis of survey data that assesses the impact of changes in the university from student perspectives since 2008.

Methodology

The 2008 survey was conducted via telephone and included 508 UTC student participants (5.2% response rate). The 2011 survey was conducted using online methods, with a total of 881 student participants (7.7 % response rate), for an increase of 2.5%.

The survey data were compared using two-by-two cross-tabulations with chi-square statistics and independent samples t-tests, to determine if variations in responses between the 2011 survey data and the 2008 survey data indicated a statistically significant change in percentages and means. Many statistical changes were found, mostly toward the positive.

The 2011 respondent sample closely mirrored the sample from 2008 with the exceptions of a 15% increase in female respondents and students who live on campus. Also, most respondents were full-time students. The majority categorized themselves as middle class with the percentage of students receiving financial aid fairly constant between 2008 and 2011, as was the fact that most 2011 respondents indicated that they were not first generation college students.

The 49-item survey was nearly identical to the one administered in 2008. The survey was divided into six sections: Choosing UTC, Student Life at UTC, Academics at UTC, Retention at UTC, Diversity at UTC, and Demographic Questions (see Appendix A).

Survey Findings

Regarding Choosing UTC, it is evident that there are many elements associated with the university that students appreciate, support and enjoy. As was true three years ago, UTC students like being here. They like the location of the university, its natural beauty/amenities, the smaller/more intimate size of the university, the professors and friends they have here, and they find UTC affordable. Overall, respondents seemed positive about being at UTC.

In regard to Student Life at UTC, respondents reported more involvement in campus organizations and more on-campus residency than they did three years ago, indicating that recent initiatives by the institution to create a more engaging campus environment have been

successful. They also indicated that they like to study on and off campus, and when they study on campus, they prefer to study at the library. This is encouraging in light of the completion of the new library complex in the very near future.

Academically, students felt that the primary responsibility of professors should be to ‘effectively teach the course material’ as well as to ‘help develop students’ intellectual and critical thinking abilities’. They also felt they had been ‘fairly well’ advised academically in regards to their major, on both surveys. However, there was a decrease in the rating of advisement in terms of career opportunities, moving away from ‘fairly well’ and toward ‘poor’. Also, significantly fewer students expressed interest in incorporating service learning into course work. This finding would seem to be an area for additional examination, especially in light of the institution’s recent QEP initiatives to incorporate experiential learning opportunities into the curriculum. Students also indicated that they ‘rarely’ take advantage of a number of offices and services offered on the campus that could enhance their academic situations. It is unclear why usage of these resources seems limited. Whether this is a reflection of student need, or if students are unaware of the resources, where they are located, and/or what services are provided, or whether other factors may be involved, should be further explored.

As was the case in 2008, respondents in 2011 identified both internal and external factors which may have attributed to a student’s departure from the university. Most indicated they believed that students who have left the university have done so more as a result of personal reasons than from any failure on the part of the university. However, the opposite was true for those who indicated they themselves had considered leaving the university at some point. A fundamental attribution error is demonstrated. Further investigation into internal and external factors that may be involved and research on students who have dropped out of UTC are suggested.

The 2011 survey data indicated that the university has continued to make important and positive gains in terms of students’ perception about and appreciation for a diverse, multicultural campus experience. Across all questions regarding diversity at UTC, the majority of responses were very positive with the most significant changes shifting toward an even more positive level of agreement. However, students reported hearing disparaging remarks about groups of people on campus made by other students. University-wide student diversity training should be considered.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the 2011 SRDS reflects that students like the university and its people. They appreciate the more engaging environment and are involved in campus organizations, like to study in the library, and value their relationships with advisors. Students at UTC want to learn from their courses and want to learn to think critically. In general, they welcome an inclusive, diverse atmosphere. Initiatives to improve the ‘career’ portion of advisement and developing student-oriented diversity training on campus are recommended. Further exploration of experiential learning interests is needed. Additionally, the level of need and strategies for engaging students in the resources available to assist them academically should be identified.