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**Survey Of Older Than Average Students
At The University Of Washington**

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SURVEY OF OLDER THAN AVERAGE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Executive Summary

In spring of 1990, the Office of Educational Assessment conducted a survey of older than average students regarding their educational experiences at the University of Washington. The survey was approved in principal and jointly funded by the Associated Students of the University of Washington, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate, and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.

Questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of 556 undergraduate students who were at least 27 years of age (older than 84% of the general undergraduate population), and 460 graduate and professional students who were at least 30 years of age (older than 52% of the general graduate and professional student population). Completed questionnaires were returned by 246 undergraduates (44%) and 314 graduate students (68%). Responses to a survey of 3500 randomly selected undergraduate students conducted during spring quarter, 1988¹, provided baseline data for some items on the questionnaire.

In general, the picture of older than average students suggested by the survey is one of greater independence and diversity than the general population. They are more varied in their educational preparation and goals, their general life experiences, and in their commitment to activities and interests outside the university. They carry heavier burdens in terms of finances, and in terms of maintaining stable relationships with a partner and children. More than half of the respondents were married, and about 40% had at least one child. These rates were five times as high as among the previously surveyed undergraduate group. Higher percentages of older students worked more than 20 hours per week, and expected to be significantly in debt upon graduation. Enrollment at the University was career-related for a large number of older students, and most were returning to school after a break in enrollment averaging slightly more than seven-and-one-half years.

By and large, older than average students appeared to be satisfied with their educational experiences at the University, and most older students rated the faculty as good, very good, or excellent. Respondents did not feel that they had experienced age discrimination by individuals, but many felt that the system itself was discriminatory, that is, it was geared to the needs of traditional students.

The special needs of older than average students derive from the diversity of their backgrounds and current involvements. Many have full-time jobs and can most conveniently come to campus for classes, meetings, and administrative paperwork in the evenings. Others can arrange their schedules around one or two day-time trips to campus each week, but can't make an every-day commitment. For some, full-time enrollment is impossible, yet their program may not accommodate the part-time student due to inflexibility in the quarter-to-quarter and year-to-year scheduling of classes. The way programs and campus resources are structured would seem to stand as a greater roadblock to the integration of the older student into the university community than do the attitudes and perceptions of individual students, faculty and administrators. The challenge facing the university is not only to accommodate the diverse needs of the older than average student but to embrace them as providing a source of enrichment for all members of the academic community.

1. Gerald M. Gillmore, Quality of Undergraduate Student Life: A Survey, Educational Assessment Center, University of Washington, October, 1988.

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Introduction

OTAS (Older Than Average Students) is a student group at the University of Washington interested in identifying and meeting the special needs of older students. In spring of 1990, OTAS requested that the Office of Educational Assessment conduct a survey to obtain a description of the educational experiences of such students at the University of Washington. The survey was approved in principal and jointly funded by the Associated Students of the University of Washington (ASUW), the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS), and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. This report summarizes responses to the survey and provides demographic information, and student evaluations of university academic and support programs.

Procedures

A sample of 1016 older than average students was randomly selected from students enrolled at the University of Washington at the beginning of spring quarter, 1990. Included in the study were 556 undergraduate students who were born in 1962 or earlier (at least 27 or 28 years of age), and 460 graduate students, born in 1959 or earlier (at least 30 or 31 years of age).

Questionnaires and an accompanying cover letter were sent to all students on April 20, 1990. Samples of each are included as Appendices A and B, respectively. Completed questionnaires were returned by 246 undergraduates (44.2%) and 314 graduate students (68.3%).

For some items, comparison statistics were available from a larger survey on the "Quality of Undergraduate Student Life" conducted during spring quarter, 1988¹. This survey polled 3500 randomly selected undergraduate students on their experiences at the University of Washington and provided an informal baseline against which responses from older-than-average students could be compared. Where data were available, they were incorporated in tables under a separate column labeled "QSL" for quality of student life.

Results

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Students were randomly selected for inclusion in the study subject to minimum age levels. Undergraduates were considered to be older than average if they were at least 27 years of age. For graduate students, the cutoff was 30 years of age. Tables 1 and 2 show that the percentages of undergraduate and graduate students who returned questionnaires corresponded closely to the percentages in the sample for all age ranges, indicating that the group who returned questionnaires was representative of the sample with respect to age. Approximately one-fifth of the undergraduates were between 27 and 30, slightly less than half were between 30 and 35, and one-fifth were between 36 and 40. Slightly more than half of the graduate students were between 30 and 35, with declining percentages in the higher age ranges.

1. Gerald M. Gillmore, Quality of Undergraduate Student Life: A Survey, Educational Assessment Center, University of Washington, October, 1988.

Respondents tended to feel older than other students of their own class standing. This was especially true for undergraduates; 93.3% of the students responding felt they were "somewhat" or "considerably" older than the general student population. (See Table 4.) This was less universally true for graduate students, although the majority still felt "older" or "considerably older" (75.6%).

Table 4.
Relative to the general student population at your class standing, do you feel that you are:
(Percent)

	<u>Undergraduate</u> (N=238)	<u>Graduate</u> (N=311)	<u>Total</u> (N=549)
Considerably older	29.4	17.7	22.8
Somewhat older	63.9	57.9	60.5
About average	6.3	22.5	15.5
Somewhat younger	.4	1.9	1.3
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

As shown in Tables 5 and 6, females were somewhat more likely to return questionnaires than were males among both undergraduates and graduates. This bias exaggerated an existing difference in favor of undergraduate females in the sample, and reversed a small difference in favor of males among graduate students. Slightly more females than males responded to the Quality of Student Life (QSL) survey.

Table 5.
Sex Distribution of Undergraduates (Percent)

	<u>Respondents</u> (N=245)	<u>Sample</u> (N=481)	<u>QSL</u> (N=3489)
Female	63.3	58.1	51.6
Male	36.7	41.9	48.4
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 6.
Sex Distribution of Graduate Students (Percent)

	<u>Respondents</u> (N=314)	<u>Sample</u> (N=518)
Female	51.3	47.8
Male	48.7	52.2
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Tables 7 and 8 compare the marital status of, and number of children supported by undergraduate, graduate, and QSL respondents. As can be seen from Table 7, a large proportion of older students were married, and the percentage was higher among graduate students than among undergraduates (57.6% and 49.2%, respectively). Equal proportions of undergraduate and graduate students had never been married (30.5% and 31.8%, respectively), while more undergraduate students had been previously married (20.3%) than were graduate students (10.6%). Respondents to the Quality of Student Life (QSL) survey were, for the most part, never married (88.8%).

In Table 8, nearly 40% of both undergraduate and graduate respondents reported that they were supporting at least one child, and 7% of the undergraduates and 5.5% of the graduate students were

Table 9.
Current living situation (Percent)

	<u>Undergraduate</u> (N=246)	<u>Graduate</u> (N=313)	<u>Total</u> (N=559)	<u>QSL</u> (1308)
Undergrad. res. hall	.4	----	.2	20.5
Grad. res. hall or older-student housing	.4	1.0	.7	----
Off-campus	95.5	94.6	95.0	62.1
Sorority or fraternity	----	----	----	16.3
Univ. family housing	3.7	4.5	4.1	1.1
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 10.
Do you live: (Percent)

	<u>Undergraduate</u> (N=245)	<u>Graduate</u> (N=314)	<u>Total</u> (N=559)	<u>QSL</u> (N=1308)
Alone	18.8	21.7	20.4	9.0
With partner and/or children	61.6	66.2	64.2	14.1
With acquaintances	8.6	6.7	7.5	59.9
With parents	----	----	----	17.0
Other	11.0	5.4	7.9	
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 11 shows that fewer than 6% of the students, whether graduate or undergraduate, reported that they had been enrolled continuously in a post-secondary institution, and the average break in their college education reported by the two groups was nearly identical: 7.7 years for undergraduates, and 7.6 years for graduate students.

Table 11.
What is the longest break you have taken in your enrollment in higher education? (Percent)

	<u>Undergraduate</u> (N=239)	<u>Graduate</u> (N=308)	<u>Total</u> (N=547)
0 years	5.9	2.9	4.2
1-3	19.2	21.1	20.3
4-6	27.6	26.9	27.2
7-9	11.7	18.5	15.5
10-12	17.2	14.0	15.4
More than 12 years	18.4	16.6	17.4
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

Undergraduates and graduate students differed somewhat in their primary reason for attending the University, and in their areas of study. As shown in Table 12, a change in careers was cited as the primary reason for enrollment by the largest number of undergraduates (47.8%), whereas, for graduate students, a change in careers and upgrading current job skills were of equal importance (34.5% and 31.0%, respectively).

Table 15 shows the average percentage of the total cost of UW education coming from various sources. Personal savings was the largest source of funds for both older than average undergraduate and graduate students (average percentages of 22.1% and 19.4%, respectively). In contrast, parents constituted the primary source for the general undergraduate population (39.3%, as cited in the Quality of Student Life survey). The next largest source of funds for undergraduates and graduate students was work (17.4% and 15.6%, respectively), followed by spouse (17.3% and 11.6%, respectively), and guaranteed loans (10.9% and 11.5%, respectively). Scholarships was cited as a moderately large source of funding for graduate students (11.7%).

Table 16 shows that older than average students expected to be more in debt at the conclusion of their education than did the general undergraduate population. Only 9.0% of the undergraduates who responded to the Quality of Student Life (QSL) survey expected to be \$10,000 or more in debt, and 54.7% expected to have no debt. In contrast, 21.4% of the older than average undergraduates and 28.9% of the graduate students expected debt of \$10,000 or more, while 41.2% and 48.2%, respectively, expected no debt.

Table 14.
On average, how many hours per week do you work for wages while enrolled? (Percent)

	<u>Undergraduate</u> (N=238)	<u>Graduate</u> (N=307)	<u>Total</u> (N=545)	<u>QSL</u> (N=1301)
0	30.7	26.1	28.1	30.6
1-5	5.0	3.6	4.2	5.5
6-10	7.6	8.1	7.9	9.1
11-15	6.3	5.2	5.7	15.3
16-20	17.2	21.5	19.6	17.7
21-30	11.3	10.4	10.8	13.1
More than 30	21.8	25.1	23.7	8.5
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 15.
Average Percentage of the Total Cost of UW Education Coming from Various Sources

	<u>Undergraduate</u> (N=246)	<u>Graduate</u> (N=314)	<u>Total</u> (N=560)	<u>QSL</u> (N=1291)
Scholarships	2.9	11.7	7.8	6.7
Federal or state grants	7.7	5.2	6.3	7.2
Guaranteed loans	10.9	11.5	11.2	7.1
Other loans	2.7	2.2	2.4	2.2
Work-study	1.3	2.0	1.7	1.2
Other work	16.1	13.6	14.7	18.7
Parents	4.4	2.6	3.4	39.3
Own savings	22.1	19.4	20.6	13.8
Spouse	17.3	11.6	14.1	in "Other"
G.I. Bill	2.4	.2	1.2	in "Other"
Disability	.6	.2	.4	in "Other"
Retirement pension	.5	.8	.7	in "Other"
Other	9.7	17.3	14.0	3.8

Table 18.
Mean Ratings of UW Experiences by Age Group
(1 = "very positive," 5 = "very negative")

	<u><30</u>	<u>30-35</u>	<u>36-40</u>	<u>41-45</u>	<u>>45</u>
Mean	2.4	2.2	2.0	2.2	1.6

Similarly, mean ratings of experience were computed for groups of students who entered the university for various reasons. These means are shown in Table 19. As can be seen, students who attended UW for "personal development" felt more positive about their experiences than did students who came to "upgrade job skills" or for a "career change." Students who came for "other" reasons felt least positive about their experiences. Differences in ratings among the groups were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Table 19.
Mean Ratings of UW Experiences by Reason for Attending UW
(1 = "very positive," 5 = "very negative")

	<u>Upgrade Job Skills</u>	<u>Career Change</u>	<u>Personal Development</u>	<u>Other</u>
Mean	2.1	2.2	1.9	2.3

Although older than average students feel as positive about their university experiences as do general undergraduates, Table 20 shows that they feel less a part of the university community. Whereas 51.0% of the students who responded to the Quality of Student Life (QSL) survey stated that they felt "very much a part of the student community" or "more a part of the student community than not," this was true for only 22.1% of the older than average undergraduate students and 21.7% of the graduate students. At the same time, 44.7% and 39.0% of the older than average students (undergraduate and graduate students, respectively) reported that they "sometimes" or "often feel isolated from the student community," in contrast to 21.7% of the general undergraduate population.

The degree of isolation felt by older students was more similar to that found among "commuters" in the QSL study. When the QSL undergraduate sample was restricted to those who lived off-campus and worked more than 20 hours per week, 28.0% said they felt "very much a part" of the community, or "more a part than not." When the older student group was restricted according to the same criteria, the percentage dropped from 22.6% to 16.2%. This difference was due to the effects of working more than 20 hours, rather than living off-campus. When only working older students were included, 15.7% felt they were part of the community vs. 23.2% when only those living off-campus were considered.

Table 20.
To what extent do you feel you are a part of the University student community? (Percent)

	<u>Undergraduate</u> (N=244)	<u>Graduate</u> (N=305)	<u>Total</u> (N=549)	<u>QSL</u> (N=1306)
Very much a part	3.7	3.7	3.8	15.2
More so than not	18.4	19.0	18.8	35.8
Neutral	33.2	38.0	35.9	27.3
Sometimes isolated	20.5	22.3	21.5	13.7
Often isolated	24.2	16.7	20.0	8.0
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0