

Background and methodology

Conducted over the course of April 2005, the Students' Union Academic Survey sought to gage student opinion on several academic issues at the University of Alberta. The 26 item survey was administered online to 1304 respondents, and the data was analyzed and treated by the Students' Union and Learning Solutions (xLS). The following provides a summary of some of the more pertinent questions, as well as some demographic information.

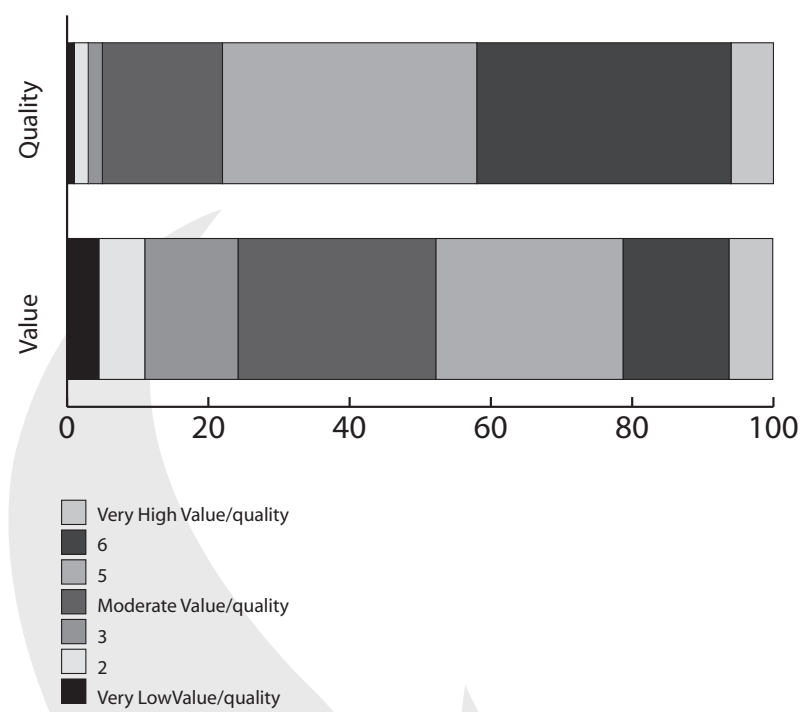
Quantitative Data

The following lists the most salient statistical data from the survey, as well as the Students' Union analysis of the results.

Question 1 Overall Quality and Value

*Overall, how would you rate the quality of your educational experience at the University of Alberta AND Overall, how would you rate the quality of your educational experience at the University of Alberta in relation to the amount of time and money you have invested*

Table 1: Respondents' Overall Ratings of their Academic Experience



In general, the University of Alberta ranked very well. Students' appear to be generally pleased with the quality of their education experience, both inside and outside the classroom. There were, however, certain trends that warrant mentioning that indicate that the U of A still has room to improve itself. When asked to evaluate the University's quality in relation to the amount of time and money spent at the institution, we see the approval rate drop. Also, several groups distinguished themselves as being more likely to be critical of the University as a whole.

Age

In general, younger students were more likely to respond favorably to the question, ranking the quality of education at the University of Alberta as being high or very high. Older students were more likely to rank the U of A's quality as being average or below average. There are certain phenomenon that could easily explain this, particularly the time of year that the survey was conducted (April- during final exams) which is a high stress time of year, especially for senior level students. Moreover, older students were more likely to have spent more time at University and have had more of an opportunity to have lived a wider variety of university experiences, both positive and negative. That being said, it is important to note that, on the whole, the respondents' in general ranked the University of Alberta's quality as being particularly high.

Grades relative to peers

Students who identified themselves as having 'above average' academic results were also considerably more likely to rank the quality of education at the University of Alberta as being higher than their 'below average' peers. This is again, not a particularly surprising result- students who perform well are likely to be pleased by the level and type of education they received. Those who perform poorly may blame the University for not being as receptive to their needs or for not providing the kind of service they feel they deserve.

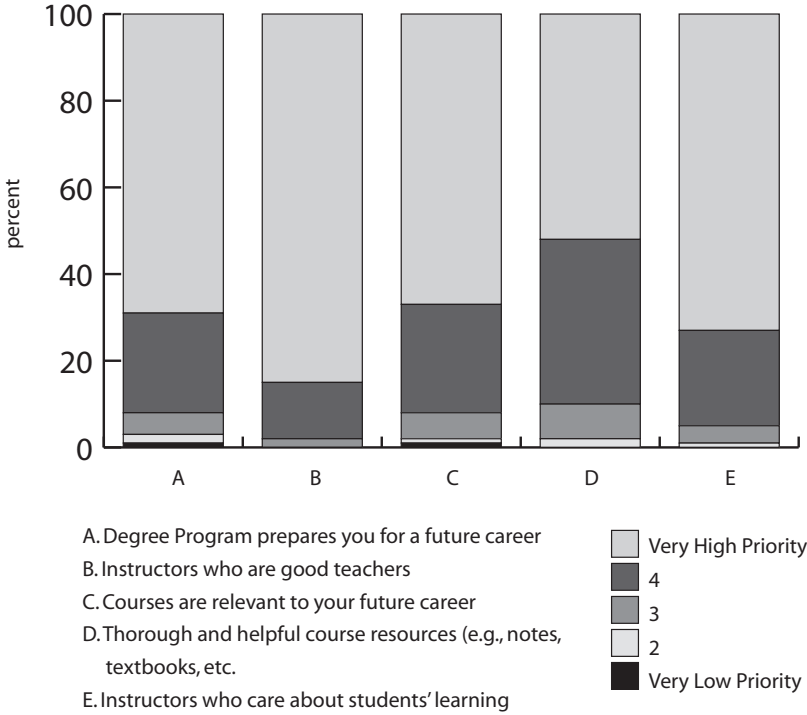
Transfer students

Likely the most important distinction occurs between the transfer students and the non-transfer students. Transfer students are more likely to indicate that they U of A has a lower quality than those who have always attended this institution. This may be because transfer students have developped a strong bond to their first insitution, or have become accustomed to a different type of education system. While this may not directly reflective of the University's quality, it is certainly a strong indication that we need to do more work in terms of integrating our transfer and exchange students into our university community.

Question 2: Factors That Produce High Quality

Students have a wide range of views about what constitutes a high quality of education. What factors have the highest priority in your idea of what makes a university education high quality? Please rate each item below using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very low priority and 5 is very high priority.

Table 2: Priority of Factors to Respondents' Opinion of a High Quality Education



Respondents were asked to rate a number of various different experiences. From the 26 available options, the top five most popular are represented by the graph above.

Unsurprisingly, certain trends emerge in examining priority areas for a quality education. Respondents indicated that strong teaching skills and a genuine interest in their subject matter they are teaching is very important to a high quality education. As we will see later, the desire for strong instructors who are passionate about their work is a reoccurring theme throughout the survey.

Age

The most important distinction to be drawn in the crosstabs pertaining to this section is in dealing with age. Younger students are more likely to select the following choices as being a 'high' or a 'very high' priority (4 or a 5): Comfortable classrooms, meaningful interaction with other students, helpful academic advising (small difference), instructors who are good teachers (small difference), extracurricular activities, and opportunities to study abroad. Conversely, older students indicated the following as being high priorities: Classroom sizes, meaningful interaction with professors, applying knowledge to practice, developing skills in the use of technology, grading reflects high standards.

As we can see, the types of desires change greatly according to the age groups. Younger students appear to have more of a desire to be nurtured and integrated into the university community as a whole. Their focus is largely social. On the other hand, older students appreciate more technical elements in their education, such as the application of knowledge to practice. This is likely due to the fact that they will soon be graduating and will require at least a certain level of experience before they hit the work force.

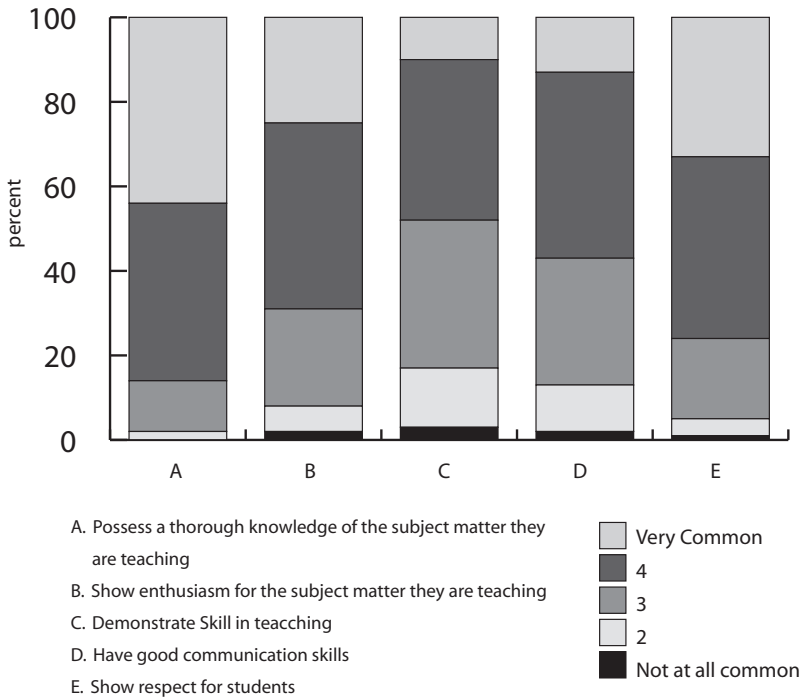
Question 3: What experiences have you had with professors

The following questions ask you to evaluate your experiences with your instructors (professor, sessional instructors, graduate students, etc.) at the University of Alberta.

a) Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all common and 5 is very common, please rate how common it is for your instructors at the U of A to exemplify each of the following characteristics.

b) Please then select the 5 statements that reflect the characteristics that are most important to you in determining whether or not you consider someone to be a good teacher.

Table 3: Respondents' Experiences with Instructors at the University of Alberta

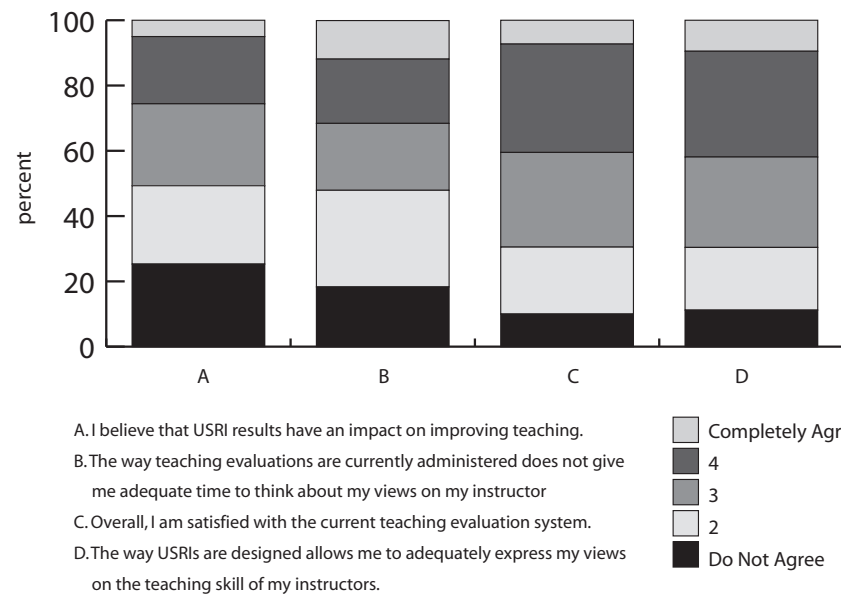


In order to truly understand what one means by "Instructors who are good teachers", we must identify the characteristics that make for a strong teacher. Again, survey respondents were provided with an extensive list of options to rate. Of the 26 available statements, the graph above illustrates what students noted as the top five most important characteristics in a teacher and how common people experience is with instructors who demonstrate those characteristics.

In examining the highest ranked options, it is clear that students are looking for a mix of interactive and engaging teaching techniques to be combined with an indepth understanding of the subject matter being taught. It is not enough to simply be an expert in one's field; a good teacher is the one who manages to make the learning process interesting to their students.

## Question 4: Experience with Student Evaluations of Teachers

The following questions ask you to evaluate your satisfaction with the current student evaluations of teaching (Universal Student Ratings of Instruction- USRIs) at the University of Alberta. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements using a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is do not agree at all and 5 is completely agree.



For many years, the University's Universal Student Ratings of Instruction have been indepthly examined in order to ensure that they are meeting the needs of students and are an efficient tool in garnering student opinion on a teacher or a subject matter. There appears to be a large amount of skepticism on behalf of students towards USRIs in general. While most students will agree that they have enough time to adequately reflect and frame an opinion regarding an instructor or a course, they tend to disagree that these are accurate markers of how they actually feel. Also, they are unconvinced that these tools actually aid in improving the quality of instruction at the University of Alberta.

Two groups displayed a particular amount of discontent, the first being the older students, and the second being those from Professional faculties.

### Age

Once again, two major groups distinguish themselves here: the younger cohort and the professional faculties. We will discuss them seperately, but it should be noted that those who are registered in professional faculties are considerably more likely to be of the older student cohort since many professional faculties require at least one pre-professional year of study prior to entrance.

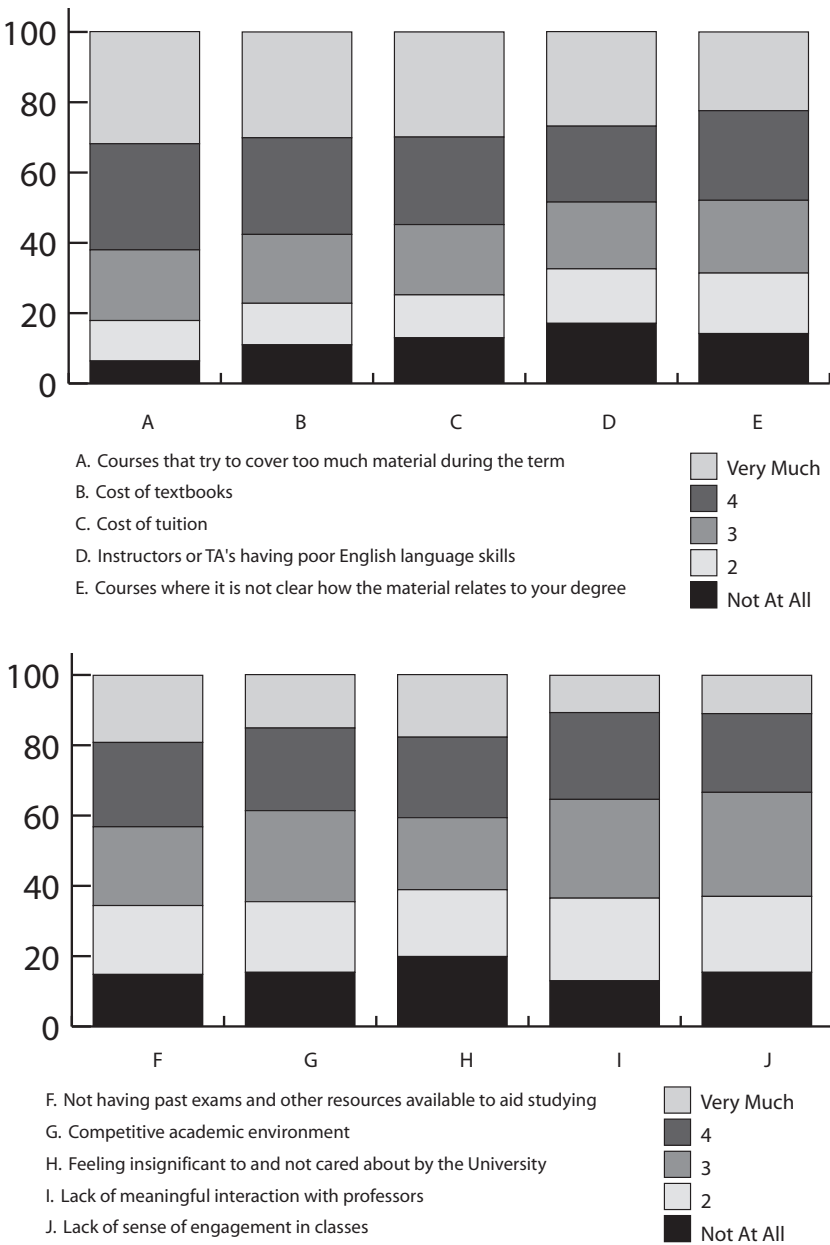
Younger students are considerably more likely to indicate satisfaction with the current University teaching evaluations than their older counterparts. It should be noted that, at the time of the survey, any student in their first year would have had an opportunity to complete two full USRIs, but would not necessarily have been able to understand or experience how they are implemented. The older students, having had a great deal more experience with the evaluations, indicated dissatisfaction with how they are adminstered and how the results are used. Older students were more likely to indicate that these evaluations are not reflective of their actual feelings on a professors or a course.

### Faculty Type

Students from Professional Faculties, as opposed to their academic faculty peers, tend to agree with the older demographic. They indicated a larger amount of disactisfaction with every option available to them, and expressly commented on their concerns in the qualitative section of the survey. This is not particularly surprising since, in many cases, students from professional faculties tend to be older than those in Academic faculties.

## Question 5: Challenges Facing Students

Students face a number of challenges throughout the course of completing their education, some of which have the potential to negatively affect their academic performance. Please rate each of the your academic success (i.e., grades, ability/motivation to complete degree, etc.) at the University of Alberta using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is very much.



These results show the top ten responses. For the large part, these results are not particularly surprising. Finances have been, and will likely continue to be given the current trends, a very high priority for students. The cost of textbooks, a continuously rising expense, beat out all other options as being the greatest financial impediment. While the University may not have a direct influence over textbook prices, it is evident that, according to undergraduates, it is time for the University to further investigate what role it can play in alleviating this burden for students.

Otherwise, different demographics were likely to respond differently. The following summarizes the more notable disparities.

### Gender

Obstacles that appear to affect women more than men include the cost of tuition and textbooks, the competitive academic environment of the university, inadequate program advising, uncertainty about where to get help, and courses that try to cover too much over the course of one year. This indicates that there is still a lot of work to be done in ensuring that both genders feel fully integrated in the University's community. Women often indicate a preference to more group based learning styles and have a higher social focus in their studies than their male counterparts. This may explain the differenciation in some of the results.

### Age

The different age groups also indicated that they had different obstacles that impede their education. The older demographic distinctly responded more highly than their younger peers. They identified, with greater frequency, the following obstacles as being particularly problematic: working during the school year, the rising cost of tuition, the cost of textbooks and course related materials, the size of classrooms, the negative attitudes displayed by some university staff members towards students, and the overwhelming feeling of being insignificant and not cared about by the University.

As with the question relating to instructional experiences, this may have a great deal to do with the transition into university life and the need to feel as if they are members of the greater university community. While the U of A has an extremely comprehensive orientation program, evidently more work needs to be done to ensure that the first and second year cohort are able to adapt to the distinct change in education type.

### Year of Study

The above results mirror those done by year of study, largely because Age and Year of Study are so closely interconnected. The following are the results for the Introductory level students and the Senior Level students.

Introductory students were more likely to indicate the following obstacles as being high impediments to their academic careers: "competitive academic environment" (42.3% vs. 35.8%) and "lack of connection with other students" (28% vs. 20.5%),

Senior levels were more likely to select the following obstacles as being the most difficult to face during their academic career: "working a job during the school year" (40.4% vs. 33.6%), and "inadequate program advising and assistance" (37.5% vs. 31.8%),

### Faculty Type

Both Academic and Professional students seemed concerned about each of the obstacles listed. However, Academic students were more likely to indicate the following as being greater impediments to their learning: lack of connection with students, inadequate program advising, uncertainty about where to get help with questions or problems, lack of support for involvement in extracurricular activities, lack of engagement. The most important distinctions between the two groups were in the areas of Academic Advising, which 40.5% of Academic students indicated was a high or a very high obstacle (compared to only 28.8% of Professional students), and being unsure about where to get help with questions or problems (42.5% vs. 29.5%).

Professional students were more likely to indicate that their Instructors of TAs' poor English skills were an obstacle to their learning (52.8% vs. 44.2%). Also, they were concerned about having courses in which it is unclear how it is relevant to their degree (50.9% vs. 44.7%).

Because of the difference in faculty size and in available resources, these results are not particularly surprising. Students from academic faculties have often expressed concerns pertaining to the sheer size of their faculty and the lack of available resources. Student advising has been a high priority because of this issue, and will continue to be worked on by the Students' Union.

On the other hand, students from Professional faculties, which tend to have a high international-based professoriat, have equally voiced concern over the English skills of their instructors. Again, this is a high priority area which is continually being investigated.

### Qualitative Data

Students were also asked to make any additional comments in a qualitative section of the survey. These were categorized into the following topics (with the number of comments on this issue in brackets): academic concerns (110), followed by quality of instructional staff (101), costs (60), non-instructional staff (52), student resources (37), concerns about the facilities (36), relevance and application of their education (29), concerns about the survey (26), teacher evaluations (25), registration and scheduling (23), comments from the Faculté St. Jean (5), and other General Comments (23).

Major themes that emerged included concerns regarding the use of technology in the classroom. Respondents were concerned with instructors not being comfortable with the technology at their disposal and/or, in some case, overusing it. Several comments also expressed dissatisfaction with WebCT and Beartracks.

Respondents also appeared to be concerned by the language skills of their instructors. Several comments were made regarding ensuring that all instructors are comfortable enough in English, both written and spoken, that they can effectively lead a class. There were also a great deal of comments on classroom size and on the lack of space on campus.

Finally, many of the comments made expressed dissatisfaction with the current method of evaluating teachers. There is a concern that the University of Alberta is not focused on instruction, and allows research to dominate the resources of the institution.

These are all concerns that the Students' Union has been working on for the past several years, and continues to do so at every level of University governance.