

All Students Dimension Report
Stony Brook University

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1) Committee Leaders:

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2) Committee Members:

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Kelly-Ann Redley, All Students Committee

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3) Current Situation And Decisions Made For Studying It

The charge of the "All Students" committee was to determine the level of satisfaction and the needs of first-year undergraduates at Stony Brook University. It became immediately apparent to us that we need to focus on student needs with respect to *categories* of undergraduates, and that even that presents the risk of oversimplifying the constellation of individual students' needs by pigeonholing them into whatever single category best fits.

We began by identifying sub-groups of students who we thought it would be of greatest use to hear from. We began by consulting the Faculty/ Staff Survey provided by FoTec. This survey aimed to examine the extent to which the unique needs of various student populations were addressed. Identified student populations included honors students, students with academic deficiencies, students with learning disabilities, students with physical disabilities, student athletes and ethnic minorities. Survey results indicate that faculty and staff perceived that, overall, the unique needs of identified student populations are met at least moderately well. The populations for which faculty and staff felt that unique needs were addressed particularly well were student athletes and honors students, with 79% and 72.8% of faculty and staff reporting that the needs were addressed at a high or very high level. Favorable responses were slightly lower for students with physical disabilities (62.7%), racial/ ethnic minorities (58.1%), and students with learning disabilities (57.9%). Of the identified student populations, students with academic deficiencies received the lowest (42.9%)

percentage of favorable responses.

Given these findings, we targeted students at academic risk as a sub-population of particular interest. Also of particular interest were high-achieving students (to see if their self-reports corroborated faculty/staff sentiment), students transferring out of the university, commuter students, and physically disabled students. Those we considered also interviewing but did not include due to resource limitations were athletes, international students, and mentally and psychologically disabled students. We urge the university to continue gathering information concerning particular demographic segments of the student population such as these. As we quickly realized, doing this in a way that is likely to yield useful information would require nontrivial resources.

We interviewed several students in the targeted categories to find out what their assessment of the university is and what obstacles and needs they perceive themselves to have, with the aim of supplementing (rather than begin redundant with) the anonymous survey they had been asked to take.

The information and suggestions we report here derive from interviews with individual student volunteers and from the FoeTec Database and Evidence Library provided by the First Year Matters administrative staff. We considered the interviews to be particularly helpful, because of our ability to ask clarification questions and students' willingness to elaborate. We caution, however, against two potential problems. First, when speaking with university staff, even if assured of anonymity, students who are dissatisfied may feel coerced to spin their experiences in a positive manner. Second, personal factors undoubtedly play a major role in students' experiences and in their likelihood of succeeding academically and socially at the university, but often the information that would have been most relevant for us to know about may have been too painful or too embarrassing to reveal. We are by no means confident that the data we have collected represents the complete story (or even captures the most important factors contributing to student experience at SBU).

With these disclaimers, we present our report of the demographics we chose to target.

Low-Achieving Students

Two members of the sub-committee attended the mandatory Academic Advising meetings that low-achieving freshmen were required to attend over Winter Break. With the permission of students, they sat in on advising meetings. Note that too few students were interviewed for us to be able to provide a reliable report of the relationship demographics and specific student responses.

Two themes emerged. First, these students tend to be inconsistent with fulfilling their academic obligations. This seemed to emerge from overconfidence; they tended to do well in high school and so believed they could coast through college without attending class or studying on a regular schedule. This first problem is exacerbated by the second problem: they are not proactive in seeking help, even if they recognize that they are failing. Thus, we should not expect that students at risk for failing will make use of course staff or university resources to save themselves from the path they are on.

Students Transferring Out

We met with several students who were planning to transfer out of the university, and the reasons they cited for withdrawing meshed well with the reasons that transferring students have provided formally to the Stony Brook Center for Survey Research in 2007. The most commonly cited reasons were as follows: (a) They are too financially burdened to continue at SBU. (b) Their family obligations or other external commitments are such that continued enrollment at SBU is precluded. (c) Long Island culture is not a fit for them personally, and they prefer to be elsewhere. (d) The academic or social fit is unsatisfactory at SBU, and they prefer to be elsewhere. (e) Their desired major is not offered here. (f) They had too much trouble adjusting to university life or to the demands of SBU in particular. (g) They felt isolated (a more common problem among commuter students than residents). (h) They felt no real connection with or concern from the faculty. (i) They had modified their educational plan and decided not to pursue a Bachelor's degree.

Commuter Students

We begin with the caveat that the students who agreed to be interviewed may not be representative of commuter students in general. The extent to which they were available for interview seemed to correlate with their degree of

involvement on campus. From what we gather, a non-trivial proportion of the commuter students are here only for classes and are not available to participate in information-gathering sessions like the ones we conducted. We are particularly concerned about the welfare of and the university's service to those students.

Of the students we did speak to, we found that there are significant benefits to commuting. This can often present less of a financial strain on them, and (particularly if they grew up in the area and have family and friends in the area where they currently live) their social life is often richer than it is for students who are living in the residence halls. We also found that there are reasons to seek housing off campus. For example, the residence halls do not provide adequate space for students who request housing, food is substandard and expensive, and the lines tend to be too long for resources available to residents. Several people cited the "tripling" of students in the dorms as egregious.

Satisfaction among the commuters seems to be tied closely to their experience of belonging. Multiple students pointed to Commuter Student Services as offering a valuable lifeline to commuters through the services they provide (particularly the social opportunities, advocacy, and advising), and more than one pointed to the undergraduate colleges as providing a small-town sized community that they can feel a part of when they're on campus.

Students with Physical Disabilities

Interviews with a select group of students with disabilities reveal that some students within this subgroup feel that their safety is compromised, and that in some respects, the University falls short in meeting their academic and social needs. Concerning safety, students report that fire drill procedures do not include a Fire Marshall or other safety professional checking each stairwell for people who may not be able to walk down the stairs. Additionally, many walkways have large cracks in the concrete, which can cause a wheelchair to tip over if a student is unaware of these cracks. With regard to academic needs, students report that many lecture style classrooms do not give differently-able students the option of sitting in the front of the class. In most cases, the accessible desks are in the back of the lecture hall. In terms of social/basic needs, most academic buildings have only one automatic door. Consequently, students with physical disabilities must often go to the complete opposite end of the building to get an accessible door. Other common complaints among this sub-group were inaccessible bathrooms, elevator call buttons which are too high, residence halls which lack accessible entrances near handicap parking areas, inaccessible washers/dryers in the residence halls and food service areas that place necessary items out of reach for students in wheel chairs.

4) Opportunities and Challenges: Broad-Based Student Sentiment

We quickly learned that there is no entirely "average" student, but the Student Survey conducted by the university yielded some clear outcomes. We summarize them first, and then report some common criticisms and suggested solutions that arose from our interviews.

The Student Survey examined the degree to which all University students felt their academic and social needs were met, and the degree to which they felt physically safe, respected by others, and that they could express their beliefs without concern about how others would react. Additionally, the survey examined the extent to which students felt they belonged. The majority (56.5%) responded favorably (high or very high) regarding the degree to which they felt respected by others. Similarly, the majority (55.7%) responded favorably regarding the degree to which they could express their beliefs without concern about how others would react. However, only 41.4 % of respondents indicated that they felt physically safe. Additionally, only 46.2% rated the extent to which they belonged as high or very high. Concerning academic and social needs, 52.9% responded that their academic needs were met at a high or very high level, while only 43.2% responded that their social needs were met at a high or very high level.

Several common complaints that arose in our individual interviews point to areas where the university's support of commuter students is lacking. We suggest that these be taken seriously by the university, since they were articulated time and again in our interviews and since they represent information that simply could not have been collected in the multiple-choice survey that the university sent to students. These are questions that, in our view, *should* have been on the survey if the goal was to determine what our students need. In hindsight, we can now use their suggestions to self-monitor our progress in the future.

First, the university must provide more facilities for commuter student parking. Second, the spaces set aside as quiet study (particularly for students who have classes that are spread apart during the day and who stay on campus in the

interim) are inadequate and tend to be taken over by noisy groups. Third, the university does not appear to respect people's time who must commute to campus. One example of this is the university's reliance on "common exams" of large DEC and major courses, which occur at night, forcing commuters who drive to make special trips and then to get to their cars in remote areas after hours, and forcing those who take the bus or train to rely on a sometimes highly inconvenient schedule. It's not surprising that several of the students cited safety as an especially important issue for them as commuters.

In having participated in this process, we see one of our most important roles to be providing a voice to students' common complaints. The university's investment in this process cannot stop at a simple report of student feedback. It needs to also include some clear gestures of the commitment to address their most important concerns. The following summarizes the most common complaints that students would like us to hear and would like to see genuine efforts to address. And we as a committee ask that the administrative officials who invited us onto this project respond with a clear plan of action for how they will be addressed:

â€¢ Parking is inadequate and inconvenient

â€¢ Class sizes are much too big (with the threat of some being cancelled due to budgetary cuts)

â€¢ The University's web page, and the search engine associated with it, are quite poor. Students cited two primary problems: (a) Typically, a search involving key terms of interest produce non-intelligently generated lists of matches. It's a better bet to exit the university's site and attempt to find the site of interest through Google. (b) Information tends to be difficult to find on web pages, and especially for student-oriented pages, the information is likely to be outdated. . Updating of information relevant to students (e.g., of clubs and other resources) is unacceptably slow.

â€¢ In an age of easy dissemination of information, SBU lags way behind the curve. (The suggestion we were most enthused about is that the university create a set of Alert categories for students to select from. When announcements or opportunities become available in categories of interest to the individual student, an Alert can be sent. This would avoid replacing the information-vacuum problem with a spamming problem.)

â€¢ Students' time isn't respected.

â€¢ Room "tripling" within spaces that were originally designed to house only two students is unethical.

â€¢ Food is too expensive (especially for healthy options).

â€¢ We see no justifiable reason for meal points that students have paid for to expire and become valueless.

â€¢ Book prices are prohibitive.

â€¢ The university's efforts to enhance student social interaction are seen by a significant proportion of them as being inadequate and unrealistic. If SBU students feel a deeper sense of alienation than do students of other, comparable campuses, a lasting solution likely involves a broad set of steps, a large set of resources, and a gradual, deliberate change in the students' (as well as other university community members') relationship to the university.

â€¢ When asked about the DEC requirements, students we spoke with expressed fervent disagreement with the university's position that the DEC requirements reflect the basis of a well-rounded education. DEC requirements have proliferated to the point that students have little control over their own educational path. Given the importance of this issue, we recommend that the university undertake a broader and more specific study of the degree to which these requirements serve students' true educational needs.

5) Sources of Evidence

Our sources included the following:

- 1) Stony Brook Center for Survey Research in 2007
- 2) FoETEC Survey Results from Fall 2007
- 3) Extensive individual interviews with more than 30 current first-year students

Recommended Grade: C Students we spoke with, and we as a committee, have mixed sentiments regarding the university's ability to meet students' academic and social needs. The university clearly makes a real effort to serve its

students, but it does not appear to take sufficient steps to meet some of the deeper problems head-on. Its response to reports such as this one will be telling. Recommended Action Items:

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Several specific recommendations appear earlier in the report. We reiterate some here and add several others, based on what we have learned from this exercise.

I. PERFORM A MORE COMPLETE STUDY OF STUDENT NEEDS

A. Use a small, *dedicated staff* to do this.

B. Identify *specific* demographic categories to be studied, and study them separately.

C. *Interview* the participating students, rather than relying solely on multiple choice forms. Include open-ended questions to allow the students themselves to identify and express their higher-priority issues.

D. Recruit a *sufficient number* of each demographic to participate in the interviews, in order to allow generalizations to be made with relative confidence.

E. Conduct interviews such that both the interviewers and the students are *blind* to the demographic under study. Otherwise, the interview may artificially put students into a particular mindset or may lead them to speculate about the needs of the demographic in general rather than speaking of their own concerns and desires.

F. *Incorporate objective data* as well (for example, scores on standardized tests). This will allow the university to assess, for example its success in educating students not just based on student comments, which may be over-determined by popularity of classes or ease of the work.

G. Include interviews with students *beyond the first year*, both as a means of gathering information about how perceptions and priorities change, and as a means of following up to determine how well the university's responses are ongoingly addressing their concerns.

II. DESIGNATED RESOURCES

A. *Prioritize* the projects that arise from this self-study, and designate the order in which they will be addressed as a function of priority rather than ease or immediacy of solution, or as a function of visibility of solution. Proactive solutions are strongly encouraged. We realize that both the data-gathering and action-oriented stages involve long-term engagement by the university, and we urge the university to maintain high priority for funding to support these projects.

B. The university should seek optimally *effective and efficient* ways of accomplishing this.

III. IMMEDIATE NEEDS

A. *Reduce the number* of first-year students at SBU, or *increase the major resources* used by first-year students (most notably, class space, parking, and adequate on-campus housing) so that the two are brought into alignment.

B. *Work with campus vendors* that affect first-year students (most notably, Chartwells and Barnes & Noble) so that being a full-time student becomes more affordable.

C. Support students with increasingly complex and busy lives by looking for ways to save them *time* in their daily campus activities. This includes finding ways to assist with course planning for commuter students who would like to streamline their schedules.

D. Re-evaluate the necessity of the various components of the *DEC requirements*.

In a world within which new basic skills for career success are rapidly evolving,

and in which many career paths are increasingly specialized, the philosophy behind our traditional general education requirements may be becoming increasingly less relevant. We should not allow simple inertia to determine what we require of our students, and we should conduct a new re-evaluation of these requirements regularly (say, every 10 or 15 years).

E. *Provide information* to students more effectively and without over-exposing them to information they aren't likely to be interested in. A Research I university with a wireless technology emphasis should be a leader in this sort of service.

F. Invite an *external audit* to study the university's responsiveness to the needs of its disabled students.

Recommended Grade: C

Recommended Action Items: