Predictors of Student Satisfaction

This report was compiled by Michelle Schwartz, Research Associate, on behalf of Christopher Evans, Vice Provost Academic, Ryerson University, December 2013

Student satisfaction, the “short-term attitude that results from the evaluation of [students’] experience with the education service they receive” (Elliot and Healy, as cited in de Lourdes Machado, 2011), is not an isolated factor, but is, in fact, closely related to many other variables. Student perception of the value of their courses and educational experience is inextricably connected to persistence, retention, and student success, amongst other outcomes (Kuo et al., 2013). High satisfaction, in turn, “leads to lower attrition rates, higher persistence in learning, and higher motivation” in pursuing additional courses (Kuo et al., 2013).

While this report will focus on predictors of student satisfaction related to teaching and learning, there are many other factors that have an effect on satisfaction levels. Aldemir and Gülcan grouped these factors into four major groups:

1. Institutional factors, which encompass academic and administrative factors.
2. Extracurricular factors, including all social, health, cultural, and sports activities, as well as transportation and housing.
3. Student expectations, which relates to the students’ choice of study, as well as the job market awaiting them after graduation.
4. Student demographics, such as age, gender, socio-economic group, etc. (Aldemir and Gülcan, 2004, as cited in de Lourdes Machado et al., 2011).

Thomas and Galambos grouped predictors of student satisfaction into four slightly different categories:

1. Academic experience, which encompasses the classroom experience, quality of instruction, and perceptions of intellectual growth.
2. Social integration, including a sense of safety and belonging on campus, as well as a diverse student body and a variety of social activities.
3. Campus services and facilities, including classrooms, computer labs, library services, academic advising, and staff attitude towards students.
4. Pre-enrollment options, such as the accuracy of pre-enrollment information, reasons that students chose the school in question, and whether or not the school they are attending was their first choice (2004).

Institutional Predictors of Student Satisfaction

In their analysis of the literature on student satisfaction, de Lourdes Machado et al. emphasize that maximizing student satisfaction requires full institutional commitment. At the institutional level, the factors that are most likely to improve satisfaction are:
1. An institutional climate that students perceive as supportive or friendly;
2. Increased levels of student support during the first year of study;
3. An emphasis on formative assessment during the beginning of a course of study;
4. Increased focus on the social dimension of learning activities;
5. An ability to positively respond to the changing nature of student engagement in higher education (2011).

Thomas and Galambos confirm the validity of the first and second point. For intellectually engaged students, the perception that there is concern for them as an individual on campus is associated with an increase in their satisfaction with their educational experience. For less intellectually engaged students, nonacademic aspects of the university are more important, and “social integration may compensate for weak academic integration.” Thomas and Galambos see these factors as indicators of the importance of first-year support programs, since “intellectual growth increases with class standing and a sense of belonging” (2004).

Similarly, Gibbons contends that “the demands of being a student are perceived as disproportionately high in the first year,” and that this explains the problems that universities experience with first year retention and attrition (2012). Gibbons suggests the solution to this is not necessarily through increasing formal support, but instead through the promotion of “initiatives for students to informally interact and network… throughout the first semester, for example, through class exercises, by rotating group composition in group activities… and in supporting subject society events” (2012). In this response, Gibbons addresses the fourth point made by de Lourdes Machado (2011), stressing the importance of the social dimension of learning activities.

**Academic Predictors of Student Satisfaction**

Gibbons’ point about the importance of using group work and class exercises to engage students demonstrates the importance of effective teaching to increasing student satisfaction. He describes effective course delivery as being “integral to making students feel part of a learning community.” Gibbons also found that the “structure and perceived relevance of the course and the quality of teaching… were the strongest predictors of course satisfaction” (2012).

In their studies of student perceptions, both de Lourdes Machado et al. and Thomas & Galambos found that academic aspects of university life were strongly associated with student satisfaction. For instance, in de Lourdes Machado et al.’s study, the importance of teaching quality, interactions with faculty both in and out of class, knowledge assessment, and quality of academic advising is stressed as being key to improving student satisfaction (2011). Thomas & Galambos found that “satisfaction is strongly related to students’ reaction to faculty in the classroom” and that one of the most repeated statements made by students concerning their satisfaction was the importance of “faculty who came to class well prepared” (2004).
In fact, in their breakdown of predictors of student satisfaction, Thomas & Galambos found that the greatest predictors of student satisfaction were in the category of “academic experience,” which included academic experience in the classroom, quality of instruction, intellectual growth, and preparation for lifelong learning (2004). These aspects of the university experience, along with a “sense of belonging on campus” were the most important predictors of student satisfaction.

In their analysis of predictors of student institutional commitment, which they define as students’ overall impression, satisfaction, sense of belonging, and perception of quality with their educational experience, Strauss and Volkwein concluded that the most important influences were “in the area of academic integration and growth, followed by the measures of social integration and growth” and that “classroom experiences and social activities” were especially strong predictors of institutional commitment (2004).

The category of academic integration and academic growth was divided into classroom experiences, faculty contact, satisfaction with faculty interaction, student effort, and intellectual growth. For Strauss and Volkwein, “classroom experience” was further divided into “degree of intellectual stimulation, enjoyment and value of classroom experience, perceived faculty preparation, and communication” (2004). So once again, the importance of faculty preparation, quality instruction, and interaction with faculty members come to the foreground as being important factors in student satisfaction.

The 2013 National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) took a slightly different approach – rather than listing macro categories for predictors of student satisfaction, they developed a list of specific “high-impact practices” (HIPs) that were “associated with desirable learning gains and overall educational satisfaction.” NSSE found that “first-year students who participated in at least one HIP and seniors who participated in at least two reported greater gains in their knowledge, skills, and personal development, were more satisfied with their entire educational experience, and were more likely to return to the same institution if they were to start over again” (NSSE, 2013).

The high-impact practices identified by NSSE are:

- Special undergraduate opportunities, such as learning communities
- Service learning
- Research with a faculty member
- Study abroad
- Internships
- Culminating senior experiences (Kuh, 2008, as cited in NSSE, 2013).

NSSE has identified traits that these high-impact practices have in common, which can help us understand why they may be so successful at enhancing student learning and increasing student satisfaction. These traits are listed below.
High-impact practices:

- “provide learning opportunities outside of the classroom;
- require meaningful interactions with faculty and students;
- encourage interactions with diverse others; and
- provide frequent and meaningful feedback” (NSSE, 2013).

As a caveat, NSSE points out that instituting these practices demands considerable time and effort, and that participation in different high-impact practices can vary within different student populations. For instance, women were more likely to participate in learning communities and service learning, while as men were more likely to do research with faculty. Seniors majoring in community service based fields were more likely to participate in service learning, while as humanities and engineering majors more likely to work on culminating senior experiences.

Finally, and most importantly, “students who were older, first-generation, enrolled part time, and living off-campus participated in HIPs at lower rates than their counterparts. These practices were also less common among students taking some or all of their courses online, as shown, for example, with participation in internships or field experiences” (NSSE, 2013).

Predictors of Student Satisfaction in Online Learning

For online learning, the predictors of student satisfaction are somewhat different. In fully online learning, Kuo found that significant predictors of satisfaction were “learner-instructor interaction, learner-content interaction, and internet self-efficacy” (2013).

For Kuo, the importance of learner-content interaction suggested that the “design of online content may be the most important contributor to student satisfaction.” The organization of content, layout, and ease of access can influence students’ interaction with the course content. The inclusion of interactive media can stimulate students’ motivation to learn, and thus increase their interaction with the course content (Kuo, 2013).

The importance of learner-instructor interaction leads Kuo to suggest that timely and consistent feedback from instructors is key. Kuo also encourages instructors to make sure students are enabled to ask questions and interact through a variety of mechanisms (2013).

Finally, Kuo suggests that training in internet skills be provided to students embarking on an program involving online education, as this can “improve students’ Internet self-efficacy before online courses are implemented,” thus addressing the final predictor of student satisfaction in online learning (2013).
Work Cited


