

Student Issues Survey

College of Liberal Arts
University of Massachusetts Boston

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Introduction

Students in Methods of Research, Sociology/Criminal Justice 351L, designed the Fall 2009 CLA Student Survey to learn about issues of special concern to students at UMass Boston. The questions the class developed focused primarily on the daily experience of attending UMass Boston. Questions addressed issues ranging from Internet access and class size to food quality, commuting and parking. Students were also asked for their opinions about two ongoing issues affecting the student experience: the Writing Proficiency Exam and the possibility of adding student housing. Additional survey questions focused attention on broader student concerns: health insurance, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and feelings about persons with mental illness (these questions were developed by Applied Sociology graduate student Arthur Stead as part of a larger research project).

Students taking classes in the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) were selected for the survey using a stratified two-stage procedure. At the first stage, courses taught in the fall, 2009 in the College of Liberal Arts at the 100-level and at the 200-level or above were distinguished. Specific course sections were selected randomly from these two strata and, after notifying their department chairs, professors teaching these courses were invited to participate. Two additional sections of sociology courses were added in order to better represent the major that most of the students conducting the survey had declared. Surveys were then distributed to all students in those classes for which the professor agreed to participate, with one day selected for survey distribution in each class. In some classes, students completed surveys at the end of class, while in other classes students returned their completed surveys at the next class session. Most students in the surveyed classes returned a survey, resulting in a total of 215 completed surveys.

The result of these sampling and distribution procedures is a sample of students from a diverse set of CLA courses, with a range of majors and years of experience at UMB. In addition to sociology, courses were selected for the survey in the departments of Anthropology, English, French, Music, and Psychology. The final sample consisted of three 100-level classes, four 200-level classes, two 300-level classes and one 400-level class. The sample is not truly random and so this report does not include statistical estimates of the confidence that can be placed in the statistics reported as representative of the entire CLA student population. Nonetheless, the respondents were typical UMB students in a variety of typical classes who they did not, for the most part, select themselves for participation in the survey. The findings in this report can thus serve as a foundation for understanding the distribution of CLA student sentiment about the issues in the survey.

Classrooms at UMass Boston

Almost half of the surveyed students reported that all their classes were in Wheatley Hall; about one-quarter were taking classes only in McCormack and all but a few of the others took classes in more than one building. Half of the students were enrolled only in day classes and only about five percent took all their classes at night.

Class size did not seem to be a major problem for these students in Liberal Arts classes. Most students agreed or strongly agreed that class sizes at UMass Boston are appropriate and fewer than one in ten either disagreed or strongly disagreed (table 1). Students were more divided on classroom

internet access: about one-quarter agreed or strongly agreed that classroom internet access was adequate, but more than one-third disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 1: Class size and internet access

	Class sizes at UMB are appropriate	There is adequate internet access among classrooms
	Percent	Percent
Strongly Agree	17.8%	4.8%
Agree	58.7	22.9
Neutral	14.8	34.8
Disagree	7.0	26.9
Strongly Disagree	1.7	10.6
TOTAL	100% (230)	100% (227)

The Writing Proficiency Exam (WPE)

Only one-quarter of the students surveyed had taken the WPE and so were asked to give their opinions of the exam (table 2). Of these completers, many had required multiple attempts in order to pass.

Table 2: Completion of the WPE

	Percent
Not yet taken the WPE	64.3%
Don't have to take WPE	4.9
Writing Portfolio instead of WPE	4.9
Passed on 1 st try	16.1
Passed on 2 nd try	4.9
Passed on 3 rd try	1.3
Passed on 4 th or later try	3.6
TOTAL	100% (224)

Students mostly felt the articles used in the WPE were fair: half of the students agreed or strongly agreed the articles are fair, while just over one-fifth disagreed or strongly disagreed (table 3). They were more negative in response to the statement that the WPE is a good way to evaluate students' writing: half disagreed or strongly disagreed, while just over one-third agreed or strongly agreed.

Another indication of negative sentiments about the WPE requirement was the agreement by almost half the students that UMass benefits financially from the exam.

Table 3: Opinions of the WPE

	The articles used in the WPE are fair	The WPE is a good way to evaluate students' ability to write	UMass benefits financially from students taking WPE
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Strongly Agree	17.7%	10.8%	25.3%
Agree	33.3	26.9	20.0
Not sure	27.1	11.8	36.8
Disagree	11.5	32.3	13.7
Strongly disagree	10.4	18.3	4.2
TOTAL	100% (96)	100% (93)	100% (95)

Reflecting these critical perspectives, two-fifths of the students felt that the WPE requirement should be dropped and fewer than one in five wanted it kept as is (table 4).

Table 4: WPE requirement should be dropped or changed

	Percent
Dropped	40.8%
Changed	24.5
Kept as is	18.4
No opinion	16.3
TOTAL	100% (98)

Food service

Several questions focused on students' dining experiences at the university. About half the students reported that they eat on campus at least sometimes when they are on campus, although fewer than one-quarter usually did so (table 5).

Table 5: Frequency of cafeteria dining

	Percent
Usually when on campus for class	22.7%
Sometimes when on campus for class	28.8
Rarely	32.8
Never	15.7
TOTAL	100% (229)

Those with any experience of eating on campus were only moderately satisfied with the food. Although half reported that they were at least somewhat satisfied, only one in ten were completely satisfied and about one-quarter were somewhat or completely dissatisfied (table 6).

Table 6: Satisfaction with campus food

	Percent
Completely satisfied	9.7%
Somewhat satisfied	40.8
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	25.0
Somewhat dissatisfied	17.9
Completely dissatisfied	6.1
TOTAL	100% (196)

Although few rated the quality of the food as horrible, only one-quarter rated it as good or better; the typical assessment was “average” or “bearable” (table 7). More than two-thirds of the students wanted more food options on campus (table 8).

Table 7: Quality of food served on campus

	Percent
Five star	1%
Good	24.6
Average	52.3
Bearable	18.5
Horrible	3.6
TOTAL	100% (195)

Table 8: Wider options of food choices?

	Percent
Yes	68%
No	6.6
Indifferent	25.4
TOTAL	100% (197)

The moderate level—at best—of satisfaction with food on campus is more troubling when it is recognized that almost half of the students rated food quality on campus as considerably or extremely important (table 9).

Table 9: Importance of food quality

	Percent
Not at all important	3%
Slightly important	22.3
Moderately important	25.9
Considerably important	27.9
Extremely important	20.3
TOTAL	100% (197)

Based on the relatively low frequency of reading nutritional information (table 10), the focus on food quality is likely to have more to do with taste or variety than with nutritional value.

Table 10: Reading of nutritional information

	Percent
Always	8.1%
Most of the time	18.7
Some of the time	20.7
Almost never	18.2
Never	34.3
TOTAL	100% (198)

On-campus Housing

Students' opinions on housing at UMass Boston were the focus of several questions. Two-thirds of students agreed or strongly agreed that the university should build student housing (table 11) and three-quarters estimated that they would be more involved academically and socially on campus if there was on-campus housing (table 12).

Table 11: UMB should build housing for students

	Percent
Strongly agree	41.5%
Agree	24.9
Neither agree nor disagree	26.6
Disagree	5.2
Strongly disagree	1.7
TOTAL	100% (229)

Table 12: Do you think you would be more academically/socially involved if housing was available?

	Percent
Yes	77.9%
No	22.1
TOTAL	100% (226)

Three-quarters of the students identified cost and safety as very or extremely important factors in their feelings about student housing (table 13). The potential impact of on-campus housing on commuting was the third most important factor, while issues related to family matters, personal responsibility, and the attractions of city life were rated as less important.

Table 13: Importance of the following factors in feelings about housing at UMass Boston:

	Cost	Safety	Commute	Family	Responsibility	City Life
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Extremely important	53.3%	52.9%	39.6%	23.3%	22.6%	19.3%
Very important	22.2	25.8	34.2	25.1	20.9	27.8
Important	17.3	16	20.4	21.1	18.3	31.4
Somewhat important	5.3	4	4.9	17.5	15.7	16.6
Least important	1.8	1.3	.9	13	17.8	4.9
TOTAL	100% (225)	100% (225)	100% (225)	100% (223)	100% (219)	100% (223)

Responses to several questions about students' living and commuting situations help to place the desire for student housing in context. Half of the students lived with a parent or relative while taking classes (table 14) and 40% reported commuting times from home to campus of at least 45 minutes (table 15).

Table 14: During the academic year, respondent lives with:

	Percent
Live alone	7.9%
Roommates	22.7
Spouse/Partner	7.4
My children	3.1
Parents/Relatives	50.2
Spouse/Partner & Children	3.9
Other	4.7
TOTAL	100% (229)

Table 15: Time to get to school from home

	Percent
Less than 30 mins	33%
30-45 mins	27.3
45-60 mins	23.8
60 mins	7.5
More than 60 mins	8.4
TOTAL	100% (227)

Parking was also perceived to be a problem: half of the students drove to campus (table not shown) and almost six in ten of these were somewhat unhappy or unhappy with their campus parking experience; over half disagreed or strongly disagreed that parking was adequate (table 16).

Table 16: Happiness with parking on campus

Happiness with Campus Parking	Percent	Campus Parking Adequate	Percent
Happy	6.7%	Strongly Agree	6.6%
Somewhat happy	21.7	Agree	28.7
Neither happy or unhappy	13.3	Neither agree or disagree	13.1
Somewhat unhappy	21.7	Disagree	30.3
Unhappy	36.7	Strongly disagree	21.3
TOTAL	100% (120)	TOTAL	100% (122)

In spite of these generally negative opinions about on-campus parking, more than two-thirds of students reported being able to find parking on campus within ten minutes (table 17).

Table 17: Length of time to find parking on campus

	Percent
0-5 mins	36.8%
5-10 mins	33.3
10-15 mins	20.5
15-20 mins	.9
20 mins or more	8.5
TOTAL	100% (117)

Health Insurance

As required by the University, all students surveyed (but one) had health insurance (table not shown). A parent or spouse was the source of this insurance for more than half the students, while the university was the source for one in five (table 18).

Table 18: Source of health insurance

	Percent
Through school	21.2%
Through work	11.9
Through parent/spouse	53.5
Independently	4.4
Other	5.8
More than one source	2.9
TOTAL	100% (226)

Support for a mandatory health insurance requirement in Massachusetts was widespread: six in ten supported a mandatory requirement and only one in five were opposed, with an equal fraction having no opinion (table 19).

Table 19: Should people be required in Massachusetts to have health insurance?

	Percent
Yes	60.4%
No	20.3
No opinion	19.4
TOTAL	100% (227)

Just under half of the students were completely satisfied with each type of medical care they received, ranking from primary care to eye care, and only about one in ten reported dissatisfaction in any area (table 20).

Table 20: Satisfaction with the following types of medical care

	Primary Dr.	Dental	Eyecare	Dermatology	Pediatrician
	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Completely Satisfied	45.4%	43.2	42.8	34.3	47.4
Somewhat Satisfied	24.3	20.5	19.8	20.7	19.2
Neutral	22	23.2	26.7	31.4	24.4
Mostly Dissatisfied	6.4	6.8	7	8.3	7.7
Completely Dissatisfied	1.8	6.3	3.7	5.3	1.3
TOTAL	100% (218)	100% (190)	100% (187)	100% (169)	100% (156)

The wars in Iraq/Afghanistan

There was little support on campus for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Two-thirds opposed the war in Iraq and only slightly fewer opposed in the war in Afghanistan (table 21). Only about 10 percent registered support or strong support for the wars in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

Table 21: Support for wars in Iraq & Afghanistan

	Iraq War Support	Afghan War Support
	Percent	Percent
Strongly support	1.3%	3.5%
Support	9.3	10.5
Neutral	24.7	32.0
Oppose	38.8	32.0
Strongly oppose	26.0	21.9
TOTAL	100% (227)	100% (228)

More generally, almost two-thirds of students believed that violence cannot solve political problems (table 22)

Table 22: Can violence ever solve political problems?

	Percent
Yes	25.7%
No	61.1
Not sure	13.3
TOTAL	100% (226)

Persons with mental illness

One section of the survey concerned students' opinions about persons with mental illness (table 23). More than three-quarters rejected negative stereotypes by disagreeing, strongly disagreeing, or completely disagreeing that they should stay away from people with psychiatric disorders, that mentally ill people are more likely to be criminals, and that they were afraid of harm from mentally ill people.

Table 23: Views of the mentally ill

	I should stay away from people with psych disorders	Mentally ill people are more likely to be criminals	I am afraid of harm from mentally ill people
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Completely disagree	22.5%	25.7%	30.7%
Strongly disagree	8.8	15.0	14.2
Disagree	43.6	41.6	37.3
Agree	19.4	14.2	16.4
Strongly agree	4.0	3.1	.4
Completely agree	1.8	.4	.9
TOTAL	100% (227)	100% (226)	100% (225)

Conclusions

The students surveyed in the College of Liberal Arts were generally satisfied with the size of their classes, but not with internet access nor with the WPE requirements. With respect to non-instructional aspects of campus life, they were only moderately satisfied with the food service and quite dissatisfied with the parking situation. Support for on-campus housing was very strong, in part due to transportation problems. Students supported universal health insurance requirements but had insurance themselves and were satisfied with their own health care. There was little support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. About one in five students reported sharing some stigmatizing beliefs about serious mental illness.

These findings of the 2009 CLA Student Issues Survey can inform evaluation of current requirements and services as well as contribute to planning new initiatives.