

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**University Success: A Comparison of Two Cohorts**

**First Year Transition**

**by**

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**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS**

**GRADUATE DIVISION  
OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

**CALGARY, ALBERTA**

**NOVEMBER, 1996**

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0-612-20793-5

## **ABSTRACT**

Commuter undergraduate students have comprised an increasingly larger proportion of student bodies and this trend is predicted to continue; therefore, it is argued that their needs and concerns need to be addressed.

Data were collected from a large, publicly funded university in which more than 75 percent of commuter students comprise the student population. In this study, the data analyses are based primarily on involvement theory (Astin 1985), integration theory (Tinto 1993) and Weidman's (1989) socialization model.

The findings suggest that while a variety of factors associated with traditional undergraduate student's academic achievement applies to commuter students, there are also some other factors that have a bearing only on commuter students. Finally, qualitative and quantitative comparisons between two cohorts of students with lower and higher university entrance grades indicate that higher matriculation grades might be an indicator of a student's potential success in the university, but it could not guarantee it.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am deeply indebted to numerous people for having given me the encouragement, help and advice so that this project could be completed.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Dr.Alice Boberg who made great efforts in clearing away all the possible difficulties, both personally and academically, an international student may face and put so much energy in supervising the project. Without her guidance and help, the research would not have been conducted smoothly. I would also like to thank Dr.Bryant Griffith and Dr.M.A. (Peggy) Patterson for participating on my committee and for their valuable suggestions and comments.

A very deep debt of gratitude is owed to Julie Kearns, Director of Student Resource Centre, who greatly supported me and tolerated my frustration during the whole research process from the design of the project. the interviews, and through to the final editing. The completion of the research would not have been possible without her contributions.

My special thanks to Diane Antone for devoting a great deal of time and efforts in being my 'English Consultant' and for her valuable comments. Acknowledgement must also go to Claudia Griebel for her unselfish help so that I would do data analyses during any time of the day without worrying about the access to computer.

Finally, the work is dedicated to my mother Bowen Yu and my husband and best friend Xiangfeng. They supported me in so many ways with love and I cannot adequately thank them for their understanding.

**DEDICATION**

**To my mother Bowen Yu and my husband Xiangfeng  
for their love, support and understanding**

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Students' academic success needs to be the primary concern of educational institutions at any time, especially for today's universities and colleges. As universities are challenged by economic restraints, universities often regard student recruitment and retention as their priorities. However, universities and colleges cannot afford to lose even a single student not only because of the financial problems they are facing but also because of the educational responsibility they have assumed, namely, to provide the best possible academic experience for all of their students. In fact, if retention efforts are to be achieved attention needs to be paid to the quality of the institution as well. The quality of a university is the key to attracting and retaining students and retention is highest at "institutions that are committed to delivering the kind of educational experiences that leads to learning and success" (Noel 1985, p.24 ).

Research has been done on numerous variables that contribute to student academic success and student adaptation is one of them. However, most of the research conducted in this area is based on the experiences of traditional students\* despite the fact that the composition of the student population has changed dramatically since the 1980s. Current literature indicates that the percentage of traditional-age, full time residential students has declined greatly and now accounts for less than a fifth of the

\*A traditional student is defined as a traditional-age (18-24 years old), full-time residential student.

whole student population (National Challenges in Higher Education 1988). At the same time, older, part-time, and commuter undergraduate students now comprise an increasingly larger proportion of student bodies and this trend is predicted to continue. Among all kinds of nontraditional students, commuter students\* are now about 80 percent of the undergraduate student population (Stewart & Rue 1983). Commuter students are, in actuality, representative of the whole student population of today's higher education institutions. Therefore, it is essential for the universities and colleges that are concerned about their students' success and wish to improve their retention rate to have a deeper understanding of this student population.

The literature on student retention and success suggests that a variety of factors are associated with the traditional postsecondary student's academic achievement, such as, good interpersonal relationships, student involvement, faculty-student interaction, commitment to personal values and goals, a successful leadership experience, a positive self-concept, availability of a support person and above all entrance grades (McIntire, Pumroy, Burgee, Alexander, Gerson & Saddoris 1992). This traditional view that students' academic success in their first year directly relates to student' entrance grades is still predominant. "It is generally assumed that entering university students who have achieved the admission standard required by the institution will possess the necessary academic background and effective learning skills to succeed at the university level" (Kearns, Li &

\*A commuter student is defined as all students who do not live in institutionally owned housing.



Heal 1996, p.2). However, there is very little research on whether this view still applies to the changing student population.

This project aims to study commuter students' adaptation to the university life, to understand their experiences, especially the experiences of initially academically stronger as well as weaker students, and explore the important factors that inhibit and encourage students' academic progress. Furthermore, the research examines whether those key factors that affect traditional student's academic achievement identified in the literature applies to the commuter students.

This study is limited in several respects. First, as noted, the population of the project was confined to first year undergraduate commuter students only at a four year public funded university. Thus, generalizations to other kinds of institutions are not possible. Secondly, transfer students, adult students and part-time students were excluded from the study. Finally, because students participation was voluntary the students interviewed may be more likely than those not interviewed to have less problems in their transitions.

## **Chapter 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Research attempts on conceptualizing the college impact on individual students has resulted in a variety of theories and models. One of the most influential theories is based on sociological variables. This class of theories and models focus on the environmental or sociological origins of student change. They "tend to be more eclectic and to identify sets of variables that are presumed to exert an influence on one or more aspects of student change" (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, p.17). They believe that student related variables (academic aptitude and achievement, socioeconomic status and the like), organizational variables (university size, admission policy, etc.), or environmental variables (the academic, cultural, social climate on the campus) exert great influences on student development. To distinguish from other classes of theory, the sociological theories focus on the sources of change (institutional programs, services, student's experience and the like) rather than simply the outcome of student change. For the purpose of the current study, the sociological theories developed by Astin, Tinto, Weidman and some other prominent writers were selected and reviewed and the conceptualization builds upon their work.

#### **Involvement Theory**

Research suggests that the more time and effort students invest in the learning process and the more intensely they engage in their own education, the greater will be their growth, achievement, and satisfaction

with the college experience and their persistence toward attainment of their educational goals (Study Group 1984).

Astin (1985) has developed a *theory of involvement* which tries to explain the dynamics of how students develop. His theory can be stated simply as "students learn by becoming involved" (p.133). Involvement is defined as the investment of psychological and physical energy in certain kinds of activity. Astin believes that the activity may be as specific as preparing for a certain examination, or highly generalized, such as, the *student experience*. Different students invest different degrees and amounts of involvement in a given activity, and even the same student manifests different amounts of energy in different activities at different times. In his *five postulates*, he suggests that involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement can be measured quantitatively, such as how many hours the student spends on study. It can also be measured qualitatively, such as the state of mind that the student brings into the study. The amount of student learning and development derived from any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. Furthermore, the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to encourage students to take initiative and become actively engaged in appropriate activities.

Astin suggests that the institutional environment plays a critical role in affording students a great number and variety of opportunities for encounters with other ideas and people. However, the student him/ or

herself clearly plays a central role in becoming involved in those encounters. The student must actively exploit the opportunities presented by the environment. Thus, development or change is not merely the consequence of collegiate *impact* on student. Rather, the student plays a central role in determining the extent and nature of growth according to the quality of involvement with the resources provided by the institution. His research has shown how students who are involved in cocurricular activities report more positive educational and social experiences, increased intellectual and leadership development, success in academic and career goals, and increased numbers of graduates.

### **Integration Theory**

Tinto provides a more explicit theory of institutional impact (1993). According to Tinto, a model for understanding the process of student withdrawal is based on the degree of social and intellectual integration within the institution.

The term integration refers to “the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community of which the individual is a part” (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, p.52). He pointed out that students enter a college or university with “various patterns of personal, family, and academic characteristics and skills, including initial dispositions and intentions with respect to college attendance and personal goals” (p.51).

These varying background characteristics at the time of entry influence initial commitments to the institution. However, these intentions and commitments are subsequently modified and reformulated continuously through interactions between the individual, the university structures, and members of the academic and social systems of the institution. Universities are comprised of academic and social communities, each "with its own characteristic patterns of interaction and norms of behavior" (Tinto 1985, p.35) suggesting that interactions vary from institution to institution.

Other research indicates that negative interactions and experiences in the academic or social realms of the institution tend to reduce integration, distance the student from the academic and/or social communities of the institution, contribute to feelings of marginality, and, ultimately, the decision to withdraw (Tinto 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). The perceived congruence between goals and the actual learning experience, along with the students' assessment of their ability to cope with the demands of the learning environment determine attrition or persistence. Self-perception of academic ability are particularly important to the learning process.

Academic self-concept is the personal confidence in the ability to learn and is formed through experiences with other students and the academic system. Pascarella and Terenzini (1992) describe academic self-concept as a relational term which is distinct from self-concept in that students judge their academic competence relative to that of other students. Academic achievement shapes academic self-concept and a positive academic self-

concept is one of the best predictors of academic achievement. A student's academic self-concept is closely linked with the achievement of positive learning outcomes; however, among first year students, academic self-concept is reported to drop dramatically.

Tinto summarized two phenomena that contribute to unsuccessful integration into the university's academic and social life. The first is personal congruency. Congruency refers to the fit between the needs, interests, and skills of the individual and those of the university. It applies to both the social and academic communities of the university. In the academic domain, students may leave when they find that the academic demands of the university are either too difficult or too easy or when they realize that the intellectual climate of the university does not fit their own preferences. The same mismatches apply to social life too. The second is individual isolation. Isolation may arise when individual interaction between the students, faculty and staff is insufficient. As noted in the university impact literature, "frequent contact with faculty outside the classroom appears to be one of the most important forms of interaction impacting upon student persistence" (Tinto 1985, p.37; see also Pascarella & Terenzini 1977; ). The more frequent and rewarding those contacts are, the greater the likelihood of student retention and high levels of individual growth. Peer contact is another important element in student retention; the frequency and quality of students' interactions with peers are positively associated with persistence.

As Huebner (1980) indicates, a good 'fit' between persons (their needs,

goals, expectations, and attitudes) and the environment (its demands, supports, and the characteristics of the persons who inhabit it) is generally hypothesised to have a positive impact on the individual. Congruence between person and environment factors promote satisfaction, productivity, achievement, and growth, while incongruence create stress and dissatisfaction and inhibits growth and performance.

Chickering (1974) believes that students change as they "encounter new conditions, experiences, and new kinds of persons for which preestablished responses are not adequate, for which new skills, new behaviours, new words, concepts, and attitudes are required. The range of significant encounters with new conditions, experiences, and new persons is most restricted for high school graduates who continue to live at home after entering college" (p. 42).

### **Undergraduate Socialization Model**

The socialization literature indicates that the relationship between an institution and its members is reciprocal. Organizations can shape the experiences of individual members by creating various kinds of influences on them and by responding to the needs of its members. Through this process of accommodating both individual and institutional needs and interests, people shape organizations and are shaped by them.

Weidman (1989) proposes a model of undergraduate socialization which recognizes both psychological and social structural influences on student

development. Weidman emphasizes the importance of student background characteristics (such as socioeconomic status, aptitudes, career preferences, aspirations, values, etc.). He also emphasizes the important role of normative pressures from parents and noncollege reference groups (such as peers, employers, and community). These pressures play an important role on students' experiences within the university's structural and organizational settings. These normative pressures are applied to students through the mechanisms of interpersonal interactions, intrapersonal processes and changes, "or the normative order and expectations implied within an institution with a given mission, faculty, and both organizational and faculty expectations of students" (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, p.57). According to Weidman, the socialization process "fosters students' evaluations and (balances) of these various normative influences for attaining personal goals" ( cited in Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, p.58). Decisions are then made to maintain or change values, attitudes, or goals held at the time of entering the university. This process is both longitudinal and reciprocal and can influence and be influenced by other components of the socialization structure (Weidman, 1989).

Involvement theory, integration theory and the socialisation model provide a useful framework for this study. Chapter 3 provides the methodology utilized in conducting the research within this framework.



## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Most of the previous research efforts have attempted to infer the first year student experiences from quantitative indices. Since the aims of the current research are to obtain an in-depth understanding of first year undergraduate students' experiences rather than simply knowing the outcome, a qualitative research method was used, namely focus groups (Krueger 1988).

As a qualitative technique, the focus group interview offers several advantages: it places people in a natural situation. It provides access to an interaction process and to attitudes and experiences of the informants, and also allows for direct probing of the research question (Krueger 1988). These characteristics of the focus group study fulfil the research requirement of the study.

Since the project focuses on understanding the first year commuter students' educational experiences, especially the experiences of initially academically stronger and weaker students, the sample was randomly selected from currently registered first year undergraduate students at The University of Calgary who are collegiate-age, full-time and commute. (Transfer students, adult students and part-time students were excluded from the study, although they constitute a large percentage of the student population). The sample consisted of two clusters of students. One cluster was chosen from those students with lower university entrance grades

(between 65% to 72.9%); the other was chosen among those with higher entrance grades (73% or higher). The study was designed with four focus groups - two groups of students from the lower entrance grades cluster and the other two groups of those from the higher entrance grades cluster. The sample size was initially set at 60 (15 for each group). As suggested by Krueger (1988), a focus group is typically composed of seven to ten participants who are unfamiliar with each other. He also suggests to oversample by as much as 25 percent at the planning stage. Since four focus groups with ten participants in each group were planned in this study, the sample size was set at 50 according to Krueger's suggestion; however, 60 were selected in order to guarantee adequate participation in the groups.

In order to make sure that the sample was representative, a stratified random sampling procedure was utilized. The procedure is described in the following steps.

**Step 1:** The first year students were stratified into two clusters by their university entrance grades. Namely, one cluster with grade percentage of 65 percent to 72.9 percent and the other cluster with that of 73 percent or above.

**Step 2:** After the students were stratified into two clusters, a random sample of 30 were selected separately from each cluster and then divided into two groups by a random number. Thus, four groups were created.

After all the potential participants were contacted by phone one week before the session it was determined that 40 students who were selected to take part in the focus groups within the sample size (60) could not be found. A new list of 100 students was requested from the Registrar's office and they randomly selected the students by the same standards and procedures described above (Step 1 and 2). The second telephone screening resulted in 51 students who agreed to participate.

A letter of invitation, which provided details about the session, location, and topics of discussion was sent to each potential participant.

In the first group, although 9 students said they would attend, 4 students actually attended. For the second group, while eleven students agreed to come, only one student showed up. Discussions with informed key personnel determined that a lack of follow-up to the original written invitation was probably the cause of the low attendance. Therefore, for the next two groups, each student was phoned one day before the focus group reminding them of the session and inquiring about their intention to attend. As a result, 5 students out of 11 who promised to come showed up for the third group and 11 out of 16 students appeared for the fourth group.

The interview questions were purposefully open-ended and broadly structured to prompt students for information about their various dimensions of university experiences and were further probed accordingly in the focus group interviews. In order to acquire some personal information each participant was asked at the beginning of the session to

fill out an information sheet.

According to the students' schedules, 3 sessions were held at night and 1 in the afternoon; each session was about two hours long. All interview sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed.

After each session, data were initially analysed using the constant-comparative method into categories, coded and presented in a descriptive format. After all the focus groups were completed, data were reorganized and classified systematically into seven categories. The coding categories were developed based on the conceptual frameworks suggested by Astin (1985), Tinto (1993) and Weidman (1989), and other themes that emerged in the students' narratives. Categories were then combined into overarching themes.

Strategies for balancing bias in the data analysis were employed. Four people examined the data to ensure reliability in interpretation.

In order to assure the anonymity and confidentiality during the data analysis and final write up, no participants' names or any other information that might identify them were revealed. In the interviews anonymity was guaranteed through aggregation of responses. Furthermore, only the researcher had access to the transcripts that were maintained in secure storage. All the tapes were erased after completion of the data analyses. The data analyses are presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4**

### **DATA ANALYSES**

The focus group interviews indicated that the transition from high school to university is a complex phenomenon. The nature of the process varies according to the student's characteristics, university environment and the extent to which individuals adapt to the new academic and social systems. "The process is a highly interrelated, web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic, and organizational pulls and pushes that shape student learning" (Terenzini & others 1993, p.9). Despite this complexity, important themes were identified. To summarize, the findings fall into two groups: one group identifies common first year commuter student experiences and the other identifies the differences in the experiences of the two cohorts of students.

#### **Part I. Common First Year Student Experiences**

##### **The Transition to First Year**

A common theme in all of the focus groups ( regardless of university entrance grades) was that the university was a new way of life and the first year was seen as a big hurdle. The participants in the focus group indicated that although a few of the students felt their high schools prepared them for university life (especially those from the high schools that emphasized independent learning, i.e. Bishop Carroll), most of the students felt that the transition to the academic and social world of the university was difficult

and that there were many adjustments needed for a variety of reasons that are presented in the following categories.

### *Degree of Freedom*

The students believed that the most significant difference between university and high school was the degree of freedom that they had at university. They had found much more freedom than they ever did in high school, both academically and socially. The freedom was overwhelming and unexpected and they were not prepared to handle it. One student who represented the general feeling that they had not anticipated the impact of the transition stated:

I found they always said the transition from junior high to high school was always so big and I never found it so big. I just thought it was just a continuation so I thought it would be the same for university and it wasn't. I guess it's a lot more; you're a lot more self-reliant now. Everything is put on you and teachers don't care if you don't hand in assignments. You can't whine to them anymore and ask for time, so it's just a total different focus.

"Nobody will tell you what to do or when to do it" is their general feeling. There were lots of assignments to do, but no one was going to check to see if they were doing their work and handed in on time. It seemed to them that no one would know or care whether they attended classes, handed in the assignment on time or did badly in exams. It was up to them to decide what was important and what was not; it was up to them to decide whether to study or not. Suddenly, they found that they were expected to take responsibility for themselves. "I am totally on my own. What are we supposed to do? When are we supposed to do this?" was the feeling they

had when they first came to the university.

It's really the freedom you've never really had before where no one says 'you be at class, you do this, you do that'. So it takes a while to relieve the temptation to miss classes and do whatever you want.

It's really different from high school because in high school there's always someone who says 'why didn't you hand in your paper?' or calls in if you miss classes. It's just a different way of life. It takes some adjusting.

This new found freedom was too much for many of the first year students and they often made wrong decisions, such as skipping classes, labs or tutorials, etc. As one student reported:

It (the first year experience at the university) is hectic. I wish so much that I'd be used to the mode of doing everything by myself and no one pushing me ever to go to class and no one calling in if I'm late or anything like that.

#### *Unprepared for University Life*

Most students felt that they were not well prepared for university life and thus were under great pressure. When they entered university, they found it was a totally different way of life with a different environment and pace from high school. Most students found that the pace of 13 week university courses was very different from high school courses; the work loads were heavy and the teaching methods were totally different.

The amount of work we were doing in high school just pales compared to the amount that you suddenly end up doing now. I probably have done as much work this semester as I did in all three years of high school. ... .. I try to keep up. It's really hard to keep up

everything when you have five courses.

Another student indicated:

I think the pace (is the hardest thing about adjusting to the university). ..you're in the lecture and writing down your notes and the next time you go to the lectures, it's totally a different topic or whatever. It seems like you get a lot each time.

Although there was a big transition from high school to university, nobody had ever told the students about these changes, what to expect and how to deal with it. As a result, they felt they were at a loss for what to do, and found that it was hard to fit into the university's life. One student complained:

When you get here, it's kind of cold water in the face. Because it's so different (from high school). ... .. I guess that's how it is in high schools. They don't really prepare us to do that much; I think they need to give out more information about the kinds of thing that go on with university.

One of the biggest difficulties they met was clarifying the academic and social expectations of the university, and struggling with the assumption that they already knew all about university life: the regulations, services, and academic expectations. In fact, they did not know what the university expected of them and what academic expectations they needed to meet for a certain course. As students reported:

This is an example. All throughout high school, you were taught this is the form you have to use to write essays and this is what you have to do. I got the format down, I worked hard, got 80's and 90's. I came here and I wrote in the same format for something and I got a D. And I'm like, what's wrong with the paper? Because it's not in



the right university format? What is the right university format? Why didn't anyone tell you that all of a sudden English essays change when you go to university. Why didn't anyone say that the emphasis on exams and some part changed. These sort of things worked in high school and now you come in here and there's the assumption that you'll know all of this. ... ..There's just a whole bunch of staff that just kind of floats around, and somehow you're supposed to know and you don't know how you're supposed to know that.

I have a friend; she's taking a course right now and she just wrote a paper recently... she didn't know that you were supposed to footnote an idea from an idea so he (her professor) said he was going to write her down for plagiarism and he just assumed she would know it because she's attending the university. And he said well 2nd or 3rd year students would know it so how come you don't. And she's like 'well, nobody told me'.

### *Loneliness and Feelings of Isolation*

The other common concerns with the majority of first year students were feelings of loneliness and isolation. They believed that huge class sizes limited the opportunities to interact with other students and professors and thus made the university environment really impersonal. As mentioned above the theme that no one cared whether they attended their classes or did the assignments was echoed by many students and one student remembered how scary this was when she noted, "... ..you have the sense of being totally alone, and suddenly, for the first time in your life, responsible totally for yourself". Although the weight of new responsibility was mentioned by several students, most of them felt that the problem was not so much the new responsibility but rather the loneliness and isolation:

I think it is coming here and not really knowing anyone and the classes are so big and you're just sitting there and you don't know how to talk to someone. It's kind of intimidating to ask a professor questions. I think it's not the responsibility weighing so much on you but it's being alone.

Almost all the students who were from Calgary commented that while many of their friends from high school were also at the university, they did not see each other very often because of different schedules.

#### *Lack of Support*

This feeling of loneliness and isolation was attributed to a lack of support, encouragement and incentives on the campus by many of the students.

You're just kind of by yourself all the time. Like nobody really helps or gets you motivated; not that I want someone telling me what to do but just the incentive (should be) there.

Another student expressed his disappointment with his search for help in making some academic decisions:

It's kind of frustrating trying to decide what my major is ... .. So I went to four different offices to find out anything in the different faculties and really I couldn't find anything so I just forgot it.

Assistance for first year students in transition to university life was appreciated where it occurred, for example, learning centres and 'buddy' systems. Students appreciate if the help was available when they needed it.

I really like the fact that biology has a learning center. Because sometimes you need the help at certain time and you can't, and

sometimes you can't make it to professors' time because you are not going to miss a class to get notes that you really need or to get help on an assignment. So the availability of help is really a good thing. It really helps out.

For us (students in Faculty of Engineering), we got a phone call from another student that helped me a lot because she called me a couple of times to check if I had questions. ... I thought that was just a really good idea (to get a phone call from a senior student). ...They followed you up and they have a buddy system where you hook up with an engineer a year older. It's all optional but it's kind of nice, it starts you off.

#### *Future Career Options*

Help in other areas besides academics was also noted by students. Most students were very much concerned with their future career, whether jobs were going to be available in the fields they chose in the future. As one student indicated:

With so many people back home who have gone through four years of university and then gone to trade school, and haven't been able to find a job at all, I wanted to find something that I am going to be financially secure with. So it has been pretty hard this year, I've looked into the college(s) like SAIT, Mount Royal. Looking for options, to see.

Another student became really worried about his future, "There are stories that come back to haunt you, that people graduate and they're out of work. It scares you".

#### **Academic Skills**

Students, in many cases, described their feelings of inadequacy with their academic skills.

### *Uncertainty*

For many of the students, the academic transition to university was the most challenging. They found that university's academic expectations are not emphasized or clearly articulated in information prospective and new student orientation programs. It took them some time to realize that the academic rigour and standards of a university are very different from those of high school and the strategies that worked for students in high school no longer work in the university setting. Many of the students indicated that the biggest barriers were uncertainty about what to study and how to study. They did not know how to take notes, what notes to take. They did not know what was expected in a class and they did not know how to juggle the different demands of different courses. Some students even did not know what the final exam would be like, how to write term papers, and where they could get help.

..he (professor) is just going so fast and it's not really that he's going so fast, it's just that you can't catch up. You're listening intently and everything and you're writing as fast as you can and you have both ears open and you're trying to pay attention, but all of a sudden you just look down for a minute and you miss something and it's vitally important and you can't get it back. Last semester, that happened a lot.

Right in the beginning, we're adjusting to everything that was going on, trying to figure everything out... and then you got to adjust to your classes. You're already into the swing of things and you're already a little bit behind. But if you know what you are going in, some of what to expect, then you can adjust a lot easier.

Note taking is important. If you don't go back and look at your notes after then it is going to be harder. It just gets harder if I really don't

grasp what's going on and the next day comes along. So I think in this first year, I just have to get use to how to do it.

### *Frustration*

Some students expressed their frustration at achieving lower grades after they had worked very hard. As one student said:

You're just working non-stop to get D's and they're pitiful marks. You find out that you don't know how to study. In the sense, I wished that I had known how to learn how to study because you come here and you just don't know where to start.

Most students felt under pressure and that they could not keep up with the new learning environment: the pace, the heavy course load and the different teaching methods. These factors, along with their comparatively poor academic results on the first assignments and exams at university contributed to their weakened confidence in their academic abilities (Kearns, Li & Heal, 1996). As one student pointed out:

It's pretty frustrating from being a pretty good student to not getting the kind of marks you were used to getting. ... ..To a certain degree, I'm not as confident as I was before when I thought I could do anything if I put my mind to it. Now I've got to study a lot more. I have to do a lot more work than before.

He was echoed by some other students:

I could study all night for a week before the test and I'll go into the multiple choice and will not score higher than a 70. I feel like I understand the work. It's just really disheartening; you put in all this work and you come out with a bad mark. I must be stupid; I must be a total idiot. I felt like that. I just came out of high school. I was smart but when you come here, it's kind of drop. Now you're not smart anymore, you're just average.

For me the mark drop was a big thing. I found that was a big shock for me. I found I was an eighties and nineties student in high school and then when I was here, I failed my first test. It took a long time to adapt to that because I was used to getting the high marks and I would work for them. Now I'm working three times harder and getting lower marks.

### **Teaching /Learning Environment**

In addition to their own inadequate skills students found the structure of the organization contributed to their difficulties.

#### *Class Size*

Class size affected how students felt about the university. A majority of the students believed that the size of the class seems to be a major determinant in terms of whether or not you feel comfortable enough to approach someone. They felt that big classes discouraged them from approaching the professors as well as other students and made the class atmosphere very impersonal. "The classes are too big," "you can't really communicate too much in class because there's too many people," were frequent comments. The students were used to small class sizes in high school and felt overwhelmed and lost when entering the large lecture theatres .

The class size is too big. You're used to like 30 student classes and all of a sudden you walk into those professional faculties, theatres or the science theatres and you're like 'Oh God, where am I?'

One student described the impersonal nature of the classes:

Classes are so big you just seem to be alienated from everyone else. You're not always sitting next to the same people all the time. It's

really big lectures. You can't meet anybody really well.

Another student explained the reason that class size limited their interaction with the professors.

With just having one teacher sitting down there talking on the microphone with so many people, it seems overwhelming. Not only just overwhelming, it's just the idea you don't want to go and talk to the teacher down there because there are just so many people.

However, some students argued that instead of putting all the blame on huge class size, the students needed to carry some responsibility as well as take the initiative to try to communicate with the professors. As students pointed out:

When you're in such a huge huge class, there's so much material for the professor to go through, you can't even expect the professor to be able to interact so often. ...there's just so many people that they teach, they can't take the time out to make sure that they talk to every single person. It's our first step to go and say well, I don't understand. And you have to talk with respect.

It is understandable (that there's certain amount of responsibility on ourselves as well to develop interaction with professor). There's one of them and there's so many of us. Obviously, we're going to have to make the first move. There's no question about that.

Some students found some ways to be actively involved in the large class by sitting close to the front of the class and making eye contact with the professor:

I think if you're in the front you can look the professor in the face and listen intently to what he's saying and a lot of times you realize that they make mistakes too.

In history I sit in the front and I can actually look him in the eye. And then one day I asked him a question and he recognized me. He says "hi" when I walked in. It's nice to know he knows I'm there.

### *Personal Connections*

The importance of student involvement with peers is well documented in the literature as being linked to such outcomes as satisfaction with the institution, freshman success and identification with the university (Astin 1993; Rice 1989; Terenzini & Pascarella 1984; Tinto 1975). This point was echoed in the focus group discussions. In the students' opinion, opportunities to make personal connections with other students is critical to their academic as well as social adjustment and it is an important aspect of the first year university experience. The focus group participants strongly believed that friends were their major source of information and help. Friends could learn from each other and could help each other through sharing; especially, as they emphasized, the need to know some senior students in the university who had gone through the big transition and were able to provide advice.

Most of the learning process, I find, is not from the professors but the people. The professors write the stuff on the board but they're usually talking another language so you're trying to interpret when you ask somebody else. It is good to get to know a lot of older people. They actually go through the same experience. So you can talk to people that have gone through what you have done. They help a lot.

For most students, if they did not have those personal connections, if they did not have people who were there ahead of them and who could guide them along, the university was a hidden world and they did not have the



keys to open the door right away.

It helps because they (senior students) have been through it. They've gone through all the searching themselves so I didn't have to do so much because I just had to find out of them and say 'look, what do I need to do to do this'. It does really help.

It helps if you know people that have gone to university at least a year before. It really helps because I wouldn't know the first thing like what are you going to do to get a loan, when do I need to pay my fees.

Students prefer personal connections to get information and help; however, a majority of the students (except those from small faculties) indicated that it was really hard for them to make friends on this campus because the class size was too big and few opportunities were given to get to interact with their peers. As one student described:

A lot of work that students' are doing is solitary, individual work. You go to lectures; you take notes; you go away; you study; you do your lab assignments.

### *Support Groups*

Small group learning opportunities, such as study groups, seminars and some interest group activities were very important to the students' academic adjustment. They regard them as a really important part of the first year experience. They stated that study groups facilitated learning through peer interaction. By working in study groups they could learn a lot of things from their peers. They could talk to each other; prepare for exams together; discuss lectures; and get new ideas from everyone. One student

valued the chance to work with a diverse peer group and she learned that in spite of differences in age, race and culture, people in the same study group shared many common interests and could learn a great deal from each other:

Actually, one of the things I've noticed here is age doesn't matter. Like when you're making friends... Last semester, when I had small classes, it was really a lot easier to make friends and you usually didn't question how old they were. Even one lady, she was about 36 years old, and you can talk about the same kind of things because it's the same kind of atmosphere and environment; ... I think it is because you're sharing the same classes, so you're interested, obviously, in the same things. And you just end up talking about everything and you find out different perspectives and different things. It's not so much a matter of being involved with one group. You kind of branch out to meet different people.

Not everyone concurred; a majority of interviewees said that they were usually not given many such opportunities to work in groups, although students in Engineering reported that group work was quite common in their programs. Several students commented on their disappointment with the Frosh Interest Groups (FIGS) primarily because the groups were not what they expected them to be. They had expected the FIGS to be more academically oriented and they felt that the FIGS on the campus had more of a social focus.

Actually, I joined a FIG group, but it wasn't really what I expected so I didn't really go. I thought it was like a study group but it wasn't even a study group; we just like get together and hang out and go drinking. I'm not interested.

As revealed in the interviews, there seemed to be a lot of group work in Engineering, less group work in Science and even less peer support in the general studies area.

Seminars as another means of group learning activity also helped students to learn. As one student said, "We went to (the seminar on) 'How to Study and what's Going To Be on The Test'. It helps". His view was echoed by another student, "(in seminars) you can talk to each other and you learn more because you get new ideas from everyone." However, some students believed that while seminars help students to learn it could not replace group work. "Because in seminars, there are sets of questions you've got to work on, you can't really discuss other things in class or something you might not understand".

### *Campus Climate*

The campus environment is regarded by most of the students as being impersonal and cold. A majority of the students in the interviews did not think that the university cared for them as individuals. Instead, they felt that they did not 'matter' and they were just commodities or just another number. What made the students feel that way?

They know that there are students out there waiting to get into Biology and you've not been invited or heard about all the changes and what you need to do to get into biology. They just put up little posters. They might think, there were so many students we were going to get enough people to fill in the program anyway so we were not going to lose any money. It seems to the students that they are commodities.

It doesn't seem like it (concern for them as an individual), but you have to help yourself here. They are not really concerned with what what you're are doing. They're not really concerned with whether you pass or fail. It almost seems they want you (in order) to take your money.

There were some students who did not really expect the university to be concerned for them. They believed that because there are so many students the university cannot pay attention to each individual student; however, more students believed that the university should care more. They thought it would be possible for the university to try to get groups of students together and pay attention to the groups rather than the individuals.

#### *Course Content*

Course content is the other concern of most students. They could not understand the relevance of the academic material to their educational and career goals. Some students complained some of the course materials did not interest them at all, especially in science, because the course materials were too theoretical and there seemed to be a gap between theory and practice. The students thought it would not be applicable in future jobs. As one student reported:

What I've noticed in the classes... it's more theory. That sounds perfect in theory but there's not a chance that's going to happen. If you can show somebody that you know how to do something and you do it. Then you learn something; you know how to do something. You feel more at ease and now I understand this, instead of as here is what it looks like in paper and you can't visualize it and you can't see it in a job interview.

The same problem also existed in the social science departments. Students found that the text was huge and very theoretical and was hard for them to understand.

Our sociology text is huge and we do the whole thing. It's very theoretical. It's hard to understand. You have to look up the second sentence because you don't have clue what the words mean so you can't put the sentence together.

A couple of my courses is just pages and pages of text. It's not even justified, it's crammed as much as possible.

#### *Boredom and Frustration*

A student commented that if the text were more visually attractive, containing some pictures, colors and charts instead of just pages and pages of text, it would be more interesting to them and they would enjoy reading it. Otherwise, it would make them feel bored and frustrated by the course.

I've got to read 12 pages but ( can read) 20 pages in a textbook where there's pictures and charts and stuff like that. That doesn't seem that much. It seems more interesting.

...last semester, I took Physics. I didn't understand it... what are they saying, they just ramble away and you just want to leave. You pay but you don't really get a lot.

...because if you are bored with it, you have absolutely no interest in it, then you're not going to want to study. Studying at university is such a big thing, or else you are toast, if you don't know. I guess that's the biggest thing, staying motivated.

Some students commented on the high absentee rate in many of their

courses as a result of boredom.

Don't let students feel the professors just recite the book and tell them everything that's in the book. Otherwise, students will feel attending class is a waste of time and don't get motivated to go.

If the professors make the classes fun and interesting people would come to class, they will enjoy it.

### *Competition for Courses and Programs*

Balanced competitions in the learning environment is beneficial for student development. However, for the interviewees, the real competition existed in getting into the courses and getting into the programs (because the University took in more students), but not in the academic realm.

In Biology, it was really hard to get into the course. A lot of the courses were full and the students have to try for the very last day. Some of them are taking spring/summer courses because they couldn't get them in fall or winter session.

(Competitions existed) in Biosciences. Cause you know how many people they take in. ...There is so many people applying.

I don't know what were going into. It's just so much harder, it's competitive.

### **Instruction**

The obstacles to learning in the environment, however, could be overcome by individuals. The students believed that quality of teaching was more important than the unfavourable university environment.

### *Professors*

There was one category that was discussed most frequently and was generally believed to be the most important factor that exerts great influence on students academic achievement. The theme was that professors were a determining factor in deciding whether the students were interested in the course and were motivated to learn. As a student commented:

Whether you can do well in university or not totally depends on the professors. In high school I found I like X (for confidential reason, the name of the course was omitted) and I got fairly good grades in it and I made a mistake taking a full-year X; one of the professors is just so awful. I hate the guy; now I hate X because of this professor.

There were some students who reported that they did not really mind the class size. They believed that effectiveness in the classroom is not always a function of class size. Good professors who could make the classes interesting and involving were even more important. "I don't really mind the big classes. I don't find it's harder to learn depending on the teacher".

One student noted how the professor could get the students involved in the large lectures.

He had the right idea of going around the class picking out people, up and down the aisle, and stuff like that. It gets the class involved. I really like that.

Students pointed out there were some really good professors at the university who made the classes interesting and enjoyable. These professors made the learning process much easier for the students. Student noted:

I found out that it was a hard course after, but my professor is just awesome. The coolest guy I ever met so he made it so interesting and I'm just flying through it.

I think the professor I had in the first semester. He was really awesome and he taught so well, he made everybody in the class love him. .. If he ever sees you walking through campus, or whatever, he'll say hello. He would smile or whatever, so he was an awesome professor.

On the other hand, some students reported that some classes were boring ; the teachers were not well prepared for classes and did not seem to put much energy in it. The students felt that " You pay like \$300 for something and but you don't really get anything out of it". As one student commented:

Professors are brilliant people. It doesn't make them educators. I think some of them really want to be there but other ones who see the clock would hit and wham and they're gone. Some of them it looks like that they're just sitting there riffing off the syllabus for the past 18 years or whatever.

..Students believed the reason that some professors had no enthusiasm for teaching was that research seemed to be the first priority on the campus, not teaching. "...the main thing to do here is do research, why are they going to care for their courses?" The comments on teaching enthusiasm verified Astin(1992)'s point of view that institutions that emphasize reputations often have a very strong orientation toward research and the faculties at these institutions spend relatively little time teaching and advising students. As a result, these institutions show a weak commitment to student development and students attending such institutions are less



satisfied with faculty.

Professors' attitudes toward students made a difference in how students felt affirmed and respected as learners. Even some trivial things, such as a professor was able to recognize them in hallway or call them by name, could make the students felt being cared for. Some students indicated their professors were very patient and respected the students.

He made sure he was saying it in terms everyone could understand. If people didn't understand he would be so great with explaining it again; he didn't make the person feel stupid.

Other students believed that different attitudes they got from professors made a difference in their feelings as a student.

Some professors make you feel like they're interested in you ...the way they talk to the class, I think, makes the difference in how you feel as a student. Because if they're talking *to* you rather than *at* you, then you feel that he really wants me to pay attention, and I'm getting something from him and he's obviously getting something from me. But if they're talking *at* you rather than *to* you, then you have the feeling that what's the point of me being there.

Several students argued that a teacher can motivate students by arousing enthusiasm in students about learning, conveying openness to students, setting high expectations and instilling confidence in their potential as learners (Kearns, Li & Heal, 1996).

I'm in a course this semester and I can barely keep up with the guy he's got so much enthusiasm. I come in there and I'm so tired from the night before doing whatever and I can't take it; he's so alive. I mean I love it because it keeps me awake.

Most of my professors are really easy to talk to. They seem really helpful, like they want to help you.

I'm in a course right now and the professor is really good because he makes the point to meet the students so he knows quite a bit of people by name and stuff. He has a lot of insight to what he's teaching. He brought in some slides. He encourages you to study and do well in tests. Just the way he teaches you, he wants you to do well. It's like you don't want to disappoint him almost; it feels like the way he teaches.

Research evidence in the literature suggests that informal interaction with the faculty both academically and socially out-of-class settings appear to be essential components in the process of social and intellectual development of individuals (Gaff and Gaff 1981; Pascarella & Terenzini 1977, 1979; Wilson et al. 1975). This view was supported by this study, as a student noted how helpful a professor was by being approachable after class.

If the professor is really easy to approach, or ask questions, after class if you can get a hold of him and things, then it's a lot better. If you get a professor that you could never find that would make it a little harder.

Whether a professor was knowledgeable, possessed good teaching and communication skills had major influences on students' learning experiences.

I find that if my professor can communicate the material that they want us to learn, then there's not a problem whatsoever. If my professor isn't that good at communicating things, materials and stuff like that, it's just way too difficult. Like if the professor is just going to sit there and talk the entire class and not write down a single word

down, then it's insane. You're not going to know what's going on and you're going to get lost. Like in a math or physics class, where if they don't say or write down proper steps and something like, if you want to do this, then you have to do this, then you're lost in the course. Especially in a class that's 300 or 400 people. You got to have a professor that can get the message across and if they can't, then you're just stuck.

Especially in the sciences. Whenever we were doing our formula, you just look up from writing and all of a sudden there's a formula on the board and you have no idea how it got there or where it came from, and the professor's going on, you can't catch up.

If the professors did not try to use more effective teaching methods, the students' motivation and desire to learn were suppressed. One student described an approach of teaching which had a negative impact:

it was just taught directly from the text and all of it was overhead, notes, notes, overhead. You're writing, writing. You can't listen to her, because you're just too busy writing. You can't study what you're writing because you're writing too fast. Class ends and you just... don't know what happened.

Another student added that:

At least with overheads you know what to write down because they put up important things. I have a class where I have to wait two hours to go to it. It's an hour and a half and the professor just talks the whole time. I mean he doesn't use a overhead or anything. Basically he holds up the textbook. It's an hour and a half class, and I have to wait two hours twice a week just to go to this class. I stopped going. He is not teaching us. He is just standing in front of the classroom.

Summarizing from the group discussions, students indicated that they had some good instructors and as well as some bad ones. The quality of instructions definitely made a difference in students' academic success. The students defined an excellent professor as someone who cared about the students, showed interest in students, had high expectations for the students, gave students confidence, tried to get students involved, and motivated them to learn. In the students' opinion a good professor was also the one who was knowledgeable and able to communicate the material that he or she wanted the students to learn, was able to make the classes interesting, deliver material in-depth, provided extra information, and made the classes personal.

### *Teaching Assistants*

Besides professors, the other group of people that students frequently have contacts with on campus are tutorial aides or teaching assistants (TA's). The students emphasized that the instructional style of the tutorial aides or teaching assistants had a lot to do with their success in class. However, the students had experienced a lot of inconsistency or what seemed to them standards, different teaching styles and expectations. During the focus groups, only one positive comment about TA's was heard. Almost all the students had a strong feeling against TA's and they complained about inconsistent quality, marking schemes and the "superior attitudes" of TA's. It seems to the students that the TA's needed to be trained and instructed by professors on what to teach and how to mark.

It seems like a lot of the TA's I've had seem to think they're really high above everybody else. ...just because you're a graduate student

doesn't make you a good teacher and that's what a lot of them don't understand. So I think the university needs to take a little more time to look the graduate students that want to be TA's and kind of at least get a standardized system for them.

I really wish the university got a stronger outline on the TA's. TA's are really good and they are knowledgeable but I wish that the professor would say like look, this is what you have to have mandatory; tell them. And when they hand things in, this is what they have to have. I really wish that was there. Otherwise the labs and the tutorials aren't too big of a deal.

I really wish the university would get a stricter policy on the operating of TA's because there's this one friend of mine, she's taking three of the courses exactly the same as me, we're in all exactly the same courses, ..we'd work on something together and hand something in and she gets like an 80 and I'd get like a 40 on it and I go 'I don't understand.' Just the policies are different and the marking schemes are different and I wished the TA's had stronger line to follow when directing us and teaching us.

Quality of teachers and TAs was the most frequently discussed issue across the focus group interviews. The students believed that teaching effectiveness was the most important factor that had influence on their academic achievement.

### **Information**

Students who commute from home have less access to the formal and informal information networks within the university. This is another

major concern of the students. They perceived a lack of sources of information about campus life and unavailability of help the main areas of dissatisfaction.

### *Lack of Information*

While most students complained that their adjustment to university life was difficult and that they did not know how to study, what to study and how to manage time and stress, very few of them accessed any of the services which were available in campus. The interviews revealed that for most of the students the biggest barrier was lack of information about the kinds of services and resources which are available on campus for them. They could not get information except those little posters and the Gauntlet (university newspaper). However, as commuter students, they spent much less time on campus compared to residential students and hurried back home after classes; therefore, it was difficult for them to search for the necessary information among those numerous posters on bulletin boards. Only one student in the focus groups indicated that it was pretty easy to find out what was happening on campus. "You just have to keep your eyes open and you'll see it."

The students needed help to adjust to the university life both academically and socially but lack of information prevented them from doing so. For example, some students indicated they did not know what the Students' Union did for them and what clubs were available. As students indicated:

How many people know about half the services that the university offers? University offers a lot of services but how many people know

what they are? Like all of the clubs, Like even the exam bank, like how many people actually know that they can go and get help from exams?

The interviews revealed that, for most of the students, they were eager to participate in the extracurricular activities and to become more involved. However, lack of information about what was happening on the campus discouraged them from doing so. As the students indicated:

I think it's kind of hard (to find out what is going on on campus). We're kind of separated from the main here. I always know what's going on in engineering, but I never know what's going on really over here. I don't really know a lot of about the concert and stuff; I never know when they are.

These comments on campus information suggested that failure to reach commuter students had several negative effects. It inhibited the students' use of needed facilities and resources, "decreased the level of contact students have with the campus and its faculty and staff", and in other ways lowered commuters' satisfaction with their university experience (Wilmes & Quade 1986, p.30).

#### *Sources of information and help*

University is a whole new way of life for all first year students. They have to face all kinds of stresses of this new and more demanding environment. They do have special needs for support from university and require additional opportunities to interact with others, as this student noted, " I learn that you can't get anything by yourself. You really need people to help you. ...I'm the one usually do everything myself and now I realize, I just

can't do it." For a majority of students, older siblings, relatives and friends were the main sources of information and help but some students felt that their parents were their main resources of help and friends could only help them on some basic things.

The people I really talk to about my future or anything is my dad. ... My friends can't really help me. They can't give me advice or anything like that.

Older friends who are in university before me have been a major source of information in terms of the basic things, such as where you have to register and stuff like that. They're helpful.

Two other students reported the benefit of pooling resources with friends and other students:

I had a few friends that came here with me and you just kind of pool your resources after while. I saw this and I learned this, so okay I learned this too, and then you just pool your resources and before long, it's not much of a problem anymore.

So you find they (friends and other students) are good resources of information about the changes and the courses you're going to make and need.

One student expressed her frustration about the confusing and conflicting information she got from the university and how it can impact a student's academic program:

...the calender says either to take Physics 215 or 205 the first year for pre-vet medicine, so I took 215. When I got there the first day, my professor said 'anyone who is pre-vet or pre-med has to take Physics



205, so go see professor so and so'. By the time I got there the class was already full and I already had three classes last semester and I didn't want to have two classes so I stuck with it, all through it. And it was the wrong thing. But the thing was, I made sure and I checked the calender and I even called the University to make sure those were my correct prerequisites for pre-vet. And when I got there, it was wrong.

Students lacked other kinds of information as well. One student recalled that she had no idea how to take a library book out until she found out from another student. Another student did not receive her notice of Fall semester grades until almost the end of winter session, and she was surprised to learn from a fellow student:

'Oh you can just phone in'. I was like 'Okay, that works' because I had no idea how to get my marks cause I thought they sent you a transcript.

Some students suggested that it would help first year students adjust to campus life if the university could mail them a small information package specifically prepared for the first year students with all the necessary information they need once in a while. As one student suggested:

(What could the university do to make first year experience easier for students?) Maybe just information specific for first year because I know when I was reading the calendar there was all this, I mean 400 level courses and stuff. There's notes you're going to have to do this and this and I'm like, am I one of those people? I didn't know what I needed to know and what didn't apply.

Another student also mentioned the importance of sending information to the students by mail.

If they had sent me something so that it's right in front of my face this is what we're doing this week I would have been more informed, or maybe I'm interested in this or maybe I'm not interested in that. But because they use the E-mail system, I just totally lost interest in the emailing. .. I just got sick of going to use the E-mail system because it's always busy. Lots of people didn't really care to do that anymore. It seems to me like it was a waste of time. Because it takes too much time to get a single message. I sort of lost interest in the E-mail system. It would help if they sent out notices or letters.

Furthermore, one student emphasized that information at high school level was important and the best time for universities to market among high school students was by the end of grade eleven; it could give the student some information in advance and motivate the students to go to the university. He indicated that:

You (recruiters) say 'next year is your last year and you have to make the best of it. But you also have to look forward to what's going to happen in the future. So I think if universities started putting out information towards the end of grade 11, then students are looking forward to university.

The importance of making information available at high school was echoed by other students.

Make the stuff more available to the high school, that was one of the biggest things. I could never find anything and the resource teacher couldn't help me because they didn't know.

More information at the high school is a good idea because a lot of the time you go there the teachers don't know what's happening and they couldn't tell you. So I was getting a little bit frustrated.

## **Orientation, Student Advising and Parental Influences**

### *Orientation*

The most important goal of new student orientation is to help first year students succeed academically. It can also help first year students with their personal adjustment to college in terms of providing information about facilities, programs, and services and also giving them an opportunity to meet faculty, staff, and other students (Perigo & Upcraft 1989). However, as revealed in the focus groups, about only one-third of the participants attended the orientation and most of them did not seem to realize the importance of orientation. I noticed that in the focus groups, some students confused orientation with the President's Welcome. Some did not know there was an orientation and some of them just did not go because they were not interested. As the students said:

I did not go to that because I went to get my books instead.

I went to the President's Welcome. I didn't get to go to the orientation. It would have been nice but I wasn't able to go.

Those students who did attend the orientation were not satisfied with its contents and format. The students reported that the orientation did not answer the questions they had on their minds. " I know when I was just going in I had lots of question, just not timetable questions. So I wanted those answers". The students suggested what the orientation needed to be like.

What they needed to do was, somehow they had to figure a way to get people together. Get them interact with each other.

Like first year students come and just talk like how it is going, how they're doing. What tips and then you can discuss on what would help, what people figure it out and they haven't. I find that if they get guest speakers in to talk to you about how first year student can improve your grades, and then they just sit up there and tell you, you can take notes, you can do this and this. It's better to get a chance to talk to other students, 'Hey, what is working for you?' and stuff like that. That would help.

### *Advising*

The literature on student success suggests that advising is an important means of helping students to explore life, career and educational goals and it is also a method for selecting courses and arranging schedules. "As partners in the process, students can learn to discover options, frame questions, gather information, and make decisions, which can increase their involvement in college and encourage them to persist to graduation" (Frost 1991 p.v). However, it was astonishing to find that only two students in the focus groups knew there were advisors on campus and none of them had ever accessed advisors. The students did not get help from advisors, not because they had not really felt a need, but they did not know who, or where, advisors were. As a direct result from the lack of academic advising, a majority of the students had no idea what major they would go into and what career goal they would like to pursue, and they did not know who could offer them help on career decisions. This will certainly have a negative effect on the students' academic development, as the literature suggests that freshman who lack any certainty about their academic majors and intended careers are at risk of attrition (Levitz & Noel 1989).

### *Parental Influence*

Parents play a very important role in the students' career decisions. Almost one third of the interviewees said that they often asked advice from their parents on what major to choose. Parents all hoped their children would have a bright future. However, sometimes parents' expectations could be difficult to meet. As revealed in the focus groups the majors that usually were suggested by parents were business, law and medicine in spite of their children's interests and abilities. As one student in the Music Department reported:

My parents don't really understand. Like with music, that's me. You take that away, it's a exoskeleton, but it's like my dad doesn't seem to care for music. My dad wants me to go into business or something. They hear me practicing but they don't seem to be that interested. . . . I don't really get much support from home.

And he also introduced one of his classmate's case:

He's a trumpet player. His parents kept saying go into Engineering, do this; do that; do business; do a science; go into this and that. And they kept every single time telling him to do something else and he was getting fed up with it.

His point was echoed by several other students.

My dad is like, go for the top, be a professional lawyer or doctors. You know doctor is always the highest, and then comes business. Business, Law and Medicine are the three biggest thing than anything else.

You could be an English major, or philosophy or engineering. When they (parents) get a little uneasy and say 'hey wait a second I didn't put you in university for that'.

The students believed that their parents' expectations and opinions on choosing their majors did not really help them out, instead they could put pressures on them and made them feel frustrated.

Parents' expectation is so much harder say doing business and stuff. It's just so much harder to get into so that's the real pressure there.

### **Campus Involvement**

The value of student involvement in campus life and its positive correlation with college persistence, satisfaction with the institution and personal development are well documented in the literature ( Rice 1989; Wilmes & Quade 1986; Noel, Levitz & Saluri 1985; Astin 1977, 1975). Research indicates that the more students became involved with the university experience, interact with their peers and faculty members, the more they become integrated into the university, and the more they persist and develop academically and socially. As noticed in this study, although all the students agreed that being involved with what was happening on campus had great impact on student university life in terms of meeting new people, acquiring new ideas, feeling connected to the university and developing a sense of belonging, many did not become involved.

I'm not really involved with clubs or anything like that, I'm just basically come here do what I've got to do, go home and work.

There were several reasons that prevented them from becoming actively involved in university life. These reasons were: lack of information about available opportunities, part time job, few worthwhile activities offered on

campus, heavy course load, and commuting time.

For most students, the primary reason for not becoming involved was that when they first started coming to university they found their workload was heavy and they hardly had time for anything else. It is normal for students to have four or five courses per semester. Many felt that it was too much for them, especially in the sciences. They found that it was really hard to keep up with everything when they had five courses. School demands were really what stopped them from being involved. As two students said:

There are a lot of things; you have class and you have labs. I'd like to go to that (campus activities) but I can't. I don't have time for anything else.

I cut the cards and the pools and the extracurricular activities out. Put that down to a minimum and use that time to study.

For some other students, the reason was lack of information, as mentioned above; they either could not catch up with what were happening on campus or had no idea about how to get involved. For example, a student stated:

Well, I'd like to be more involved, like into sports, but I have no idea how to go about doing it.

Travel time was a significant barrier to campus involvement. It limited the time and energy students invested on campus. As commuter students, they took a long time to get home either by car or by bus. They wanted to go home as quickly as possible, especially in winter. "As a commuter, travel back and forth, I feel tired by the end of the day." This is another factor that

prevented them from getting involved with university life. As students indicated that they came to the university essentially for their classes and then they went home right after the classes were over. Although some of them spent some time on campus after classes, it was pretty much school work focused. In response to the question: "Outside of the class time, do you spend much time on campus", one student noted:

No, generally not. It's pretty much as soon as I'm done classes, I run home and get whatever I can get done there. I mean it's quite a drive all the way from where I live so it's easier to go home and get whatever I can do done there than stay around here.

It takes us a lot by bus to get home. Twenty minutes by car. Travel back and forth to school.

I just usually leave the campus after the classes are done.

Some students stated that while they wished to be more involved they found few activities are worth staying for .

I joined a few clubs on campus...there is not much. I do a lot of stuff out of school so there's not much real time to do a lot here.

I just don't think it's worth staying till 10 or 11. When it's cold, you don't want to stay; just want to get home as quickly as possible.

If there were events that interested them, such as interesting topics or interesting speakers on different topics, they felt worthwhile, they certainly attended. The students also emphasized that the university needed to make some efforts in arranging the activities convenient to their time.



If it (campus activity) is not too late I don't mind...You don't find that you come back in the evening to use campus rec or anything.

Furthermore, there were some students who had to work at jobs to partially support themselves, thus deterring from the time available to take part in campus activities.

## **Part II: THE STUDENT GROUPS COMPARED**

### **Qualitative Differences between the Two Cohorts of students**

Although all the first year students shared some common experiences as mentioned above, there were some differences between the two cohorts of students.

#### *Higher Entrance Grades Cohort-the More Optimistic Group*

All first year students are in transition, but for some the transition process is easier than for others. As we noticed in the focus groups interviews, students in the higher entrance grades groups were relatively more optimistic about university life than those in the lower ones. More students in the higher grades cohort have positive perceptions of the university environment.

(University is) a whole better place than high school. Class size wise is not good obviously, but having to go to school with the same kids for many years it just gives you an opportunity to get to know a lot more people and a (new) environment.

Because everyone is here to learn not like high school. People who

are there just because they have to be that sort of thing. Everyone wants to be here so it's a lot better environment.

I think no one can tell you what your first year is going to be like, because for everybody it's just so different. For me, the first year didn't seem like a big difference from high school.

*Unique University Experiences for Lower Entrance Grades Cohort*

Compared to the higher entrance grades cohort, the students in the lower grades cohort as a whole were less optimistic. There were some experiences unique to this groups of students. For students with a lower entrance average, the majority of them felt frustrated and hurt because of other people's attitude towards them. They indicated that they got the impression from other students' words and attitudes that it was because of them that the limited campus resources were even more deficient. This view was clearly expressed by several focus groups participants; one student's comment is representative:

Oh just from friends of mine that go 'yea, you're 65% and I go 'shut up, I got in with my good marks, okay?' But it's still, like lot of older university students are thinking that they worked their butts off to get here when the average was 73 or 75. And we, like all of us massive first years are strolling in at 65% and they are losing all their privileges because there are so many of us at 65%.

She continued to explained what she meant by loss of privileges:

Access to classes and stuff like that because we fill up everything. So many first-year courses you try to get into, they're full; they're just way full. So they lose access to a lot of the things that they really need and so there's the feeling. But it's never, it's not voiced very often but as you know, there's always an underlying feeling of 'Oh

God, it's those first years.'

Her feeling was supported by the interviews. As we noticed some students with higher entrance grades believed that the university let too many people into the university this year and as a result the classes were too big. There were not enough courses and resources. As one student said:

They shouldn't have lowered it (entrance grades) to 65, like 73 was fine. I think there's just too many people. I'm in 3 courses where there's 400 people in each course. It's just ridiculous. Every class, they were all full.

This negative attitude toward the lower grade cohort of students undoubtedly influenced how those people felt about themselves and their legitimacy as university students. There was a clear implication that the students with lower entering high school averages were intellectually inferior. As one student in the higher grade group commented:

I've had some real stupid people in my lectures. I just might be cruel but real simple stuff they don't understand.

As reflected in the study, this kind of attitude toward the lower grade students was not uncommon on our campus. Some students noted that even some professors had negative attitude towards them. As one student reported that one of the professors made a rude joke about students coming in at 65 percent and how these comments likely undermined the students' confidence and contributed to feelings of marginality:

Not with students, but last semester, in one of my English classes, My professor made a joke about students coming in at 65% and most of the students were first years, and I was feeling really bad for anyone there who got in at 65% because I was shocked that she said

something like that. I mean, it was just plain rude. She didn't have any idea that most of the students here are first year so what if, the two-thirds of them came at 65%, and it's not that they don't work their hardest to get a better grade than what they came in with, because you know that if you want to come to university, you've got to work your hardest. But the way she said it, it just kind of... I didn't expect something like that.

She continued:

...she (the professor) was just acting superior, it's just that she was putting down, like I mean I'm sure a lot of students that day didn't want to come back to the class.

Some students with lower entrance grades reported that there were times when although they studied very hard they still could not get good grades. This made them start to question their academic ability, to think they were not as smart as other students, and feel more frustrated. A certain number of students reported that their academic self-confidence had been shaken over the first year.

Now I'm just trying to keep up there with everybody else--just some people are so smart and they're getting 80's, 90's, 100's, and you are, like, drooling.

This student's view was echoed by other students:

I'm like I'm studying all night long to get good grades. Finally, it kind of makes me wonder. There's some people who I see hanging out with their friends and joke around or out doing fitness and still get really good grades.

To a certain degree, I'm not as confident as I was before where I thought I could do anything if I put my mind to it. Now I've got to

study a lot more. I have to do a lot more work. Before I could just get by without having to work too hard.

Another student commented while his academic self-confidence was also shaken he sought out fellow students for help and support, while others indicated a strong belief in the benefits of hard work and perseverance to get them through. As one student commented:

You have to put more effort into them(course work) because you're really on your way to becoming, like choosing a career, or becoming what you want.

One student also noted that many of the students who were admitted with grades in the lower grade range were inspired by opportunity:

...I know a lot of students who came in at 65% and they were really worried when they got towards April, May date for getting into university. And then they got in and they said 'well, we have to really try now because we don't want to go on probation or we don't want to get kicked out because you can't go back for several years. So I know they're working really hard and they are doing better than a lot of students who came in at 80 and at 75. So I think it's not fair to punish them; I mean they did slack off in high school but they're trying their best now and they're really making it.

As revealed in the focus group, the lower grade cohort were really motivated by the opportunity to go to university. Surprisingly, 60 percent of these students did not have outside employment (while almost 60 percent of the higher grade cohort reported that they had to work to partially support themselves) and regarded university as their full-time commitment. As students reported their parents were very supportive:

My dad doesn't really want me to get a job, because he thinks I should

put all my effort into school and not to think about anything else.  
...He says as long as I'm in school, he'll support me, but if I'm out of it I have to find my own way around. I'm supposed to focus on school not on work.

You have to do good in school for your parents, cause you don't want to disappoint them. Although I do have a job but they want me to go through school... They never had that chance.

Several students in these focus group reported that they were first generation university students and they got understanding and support, as noted, as well as pressure from their parents, as noted above. When being asked, "Your parents didn't go to university but do you feel they understand what you're going through and what you're doing here?" One student responded:

School wise, not really, but they understand what the other flip side is if you don't have an education. They know that definitely.

Another student reported the pressure she got from her parents:

I have two older sisters and neither of them went to university. I'm the first one in the family to go to university so I get lots of pressure. I have a younger brother and sister too, so they (parents) are like, you have to do it or they (younger sisters and brothers) are not even going to try. So I guess I get a lot of pressure.

These findings on the experiences of first generation students were not quite consistent with the literature. The literature argued that the adaptation to university for first generation university students was far more difficult because for them college-going was not part of their family's tradition and expectation (Terenzini et al. 1993). However, as noticed in

this study, these students' families were very understanding and supportive and did expect their children to receive university education.

During the focus group interviews we were surprised to observe that 50 percent of the students reported that their entering grades were over 73 percent while, according to the Registrar's records, they were admitted with grades in the 65 percent-72.9 percent range. Several explanations to this discrepancy might be possible. Firstly, the question that we asked on the information sheet was ambiguous. The question was "Your high school Grade Average was \_\_\_\_" It was possible that the students were not certain what kind of information we wanted to get from them: high school grade average or university entrance grades. Secondly, it might be possible that even if they did understand that we wanted to know their entrance grades, they could not figure out how the entrance averages were calculated and they sincerely believed their grades were higher than they actually were. Finally, it is also very possible that they were very defensive about the grades they got and were not willing to tell the truth due to the negative attitudes expressed toward students admitted with lower grades.

### **Quantitative Differences**

Prior to the introduction of controlled admission in 1986, the Office of Institutional Analysis (OIA) reports that 40 percent of first-year students obtained grade point averages (GPA) of less than 2.0 in their initial Fall term of study (1994). Under the controlled growth policy, in 1994 only 22.2 percent of first year students obtained GPAs of less than 2.0 in their initial

Fall term of study. In the Fall, 1995, 27.5 percent of the first year students obtained GPAs of less than 2.0, and in Winter, 1996 this dropped to 24.6 percent. It is significant to note that while 43 percent of the students with 65-69.9 percent high school averages obtained GPAs of 2.0 or higher in the Fall semester, 47 percent of the students with 70-74.9 percent high school averages obtained GPAs of 2.0 or less. Higher matriculation grades might be an indicator of student potential success in the university as a group but it does not guarantee it.

The proportion of students who did not return to the University after the first year declined from 30.1 percent in 1987 to 17.8 percent in 1994 (OIA). The attrition rate for the class of 1995 will not be known for several months, although 144 students (4.6) did not return to the University for the winter term. It is important to note, however, that over 80 percent of the students who did not return in the winter semester had entering high school averages of 70 percent and above (Kearns, Li & Heal 1996). These results raise questions as to the validity of the arguments presented on the importance of GPA as a predictor in persistence.



## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

This project was carried out to study commuter students' university experiences and to explore the factors that exert influences on their successful adaptation to university life. Special attention was also given to identify the differences in the experiences of initially academically stronger versus weaker students.

Commuter students, as strongly representative of today's student population, deserve to receive equal care and attention from the university in the transition to university life as the non-commuter student, if not more. They need help in order to make the transition to university life successful. They need to learn how to understand and meet expectations in their new community; they need to develop study skills to meet the demands of academic life; and they need various kinds of services in order to succeed. They need to be helped to decide their educational and career goals and work toward them; and finally, they need to be helped in classrooms and they need teachers who care about students' welfare, who are able to motivate them and have the inclination, skills, and talents to help students achieve more in the learning environment (Levitz & Noel 1989). However, in reality, on this campus many of the students in this study experienced fear and anguish, felt helpless, confused, isolated and frustrated. At the same time, due to a lack of study skills and uncertainty about the university's academic expectations they found themselves unable to meet academic demands. Furthermore, they felt that the university

environment was very impersonal or even cold; that there was not enough information on university services and activities available for them; that peer and faculty interactions were few; and that nobody seemed to care about their academic and personal development. All of these factors made them feel they were not cared for by the university as individuals.

Common themes regarding their first year experience as a university student were revealed during the focus group interviews. To summarize, they fall into seven categories: unprepared for the transition emotionally as well as academically; lack of academic skills; unfavourable university learning and teaching environment; instructional capacities; lack of information; orientation, student advising and parental influence; and limited campus involvement.

As we analysed these common themes, we found that in students' opinion, there were numerous factors which they reported influenced their adaptation to university life and academic success.

As revealed in the literature, the most commonly mentioned personal related factors that are attributed to students' academic success are socioeconomic status, aptitude, career preferences, aspiration, values and high school grades (Weidman 1989). However, this study would suggest that academic confidence and study skills play a far more important role than high school grades. Although high school grades are traditional predictors of university performance for traditional students, this measurement often does not "adequately identify the students who have

the motivation and intellectual ability to complete a college education successfully" (Richardson & Sullivan 1994, p.89). The finding that high school grades were not the best predictor for commuter students' university performance is consistent with Metzner and Bean's (1987) research on nontraditional undergraduate student attrition which emphasized that for nontraditional students the correlation between high school performance and university grades was not significant. The findings from the focus group study show that understanding how students learn has not been a strong focus within universities. Faculty have assumed university level students already possess effective learning skills and student academic success or failure has been primarily attributed to student characteristics, such as aptitude and high school grades, rather than other influences, such as learning environment and quality of teaching (Entwistle & Ramsden 1982; Garrison et al. 1994; Murray-Harvey & Keeves 1994). This was the biggest barrier for almost all first year students in this study. Most students could not meet the university academic demands not because they were academically inferior but because they did not know how to study. This finding tends to confirm Tinto's research (1985). According to him, although there are many students who have to withdraw from the university because they do not possess the intellectual competence to maintain minimum levels of performance, there are many others who leave university as the result of lack of study skills and habits required for university work.

The findings of the focus group study would suggest that the influence of students' socioeconomic status on students academic achievement was not

obvious. This idea is supported by the fact that more students in the higher university entrance grades cohort (54%) come from a lower socioeconomic status family (the highest parents' education level was grade 12); while more students in the lower grades cohort are from higher socioeconomic status family (56 percent). Furthermore, as noticed during the focus groups discussions, the students from lower socioeconomic status received greater financial support from their family. Among the students who did not have to work part time to support themselves, only 37 percent were from families with higher economic status; while among those who did work, 70 percent were from families with higher socioeconomic status (parents received at least some college education). It appears that for some commuter students parental support is very important.

Another finding in the study is that since a majority of the commuter students spend considerable time at home with their parents they are greatly influenced by their parents' beliefs and values. This finding is also consistent with general research and theory concerning college impacts on student development (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991; Chickering 1974; Astin & Panos 1969; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969)

For the university related set of factors, the findings in the focus groups are consistent with other research findings regarding students' adaptation to university life (Tinto 1993; Astin 1985; Weidman 1989). As emphasized by the focus group participants, the university environment made them feel just like another number to the university and, thus, produced destructive and negative feelings towards the institution as a whole which dramatically

reduced their learning motivation. Lack of information coupled with these negative feelings were the most pressing concerns for students.

The myths that commuter students typically are less committed to their education and do not want to be involved or feel a part of the university community are still in evidence today (Rhatigan,1986; Noel et al. 1985; Beal & Noel 1980; Astin 1980; Chickering 1974). However, although some factors limited their participation in campus life, this study suggests that a majority of them are eager to learn and participate. This raises a serious question for the university administrators and faculties: what needs to be done in order to create a campus community that allows and encourages all students to become involved? First of all, in order to provide effective services and programs for commuter students, the myths about them need to be refuted; their needs and concerns need to be addressed and responded to (Likins 1991). Secondly, students' sense of belonging, connection and loyalty to the university need to be developed and nurtured from the very first day of university life. Thirdly, students need to be informed about the university's academic expectations and demands; and finally, they need to get accurate and timely information on all services and activities available on campus. As determined by this study, there are some programs in place, such as orientation, academic advising and Frosh Interest Groups (FIGs) that need modification.

There were a few differences between the students who were in the 65 percent and lower cohort and those in the 73 percent and above cohort. First, the students in the lower average groups were impressive in their

resolve to be successful at university. Most of them considered university to be their job and were very focused on their desire to succeed. In the higher-average group, there appears to be an air of assumption that, even though they had the same doubts and experiences and share the transitional concerns, they would be academically successful.

The other significant difference between the two groups is that the lower grade cohort students felt marginalized. They felt they were singled out and, in some cases, they heard comments and jokes made by university people, at the expense of students who were admitted with a 65 percent average. They were made to feel that they were to blame for many of the university's ills, particularly lack of class space and the oversubscription to certain courses.

Schlossberg's (1989) discussion of marginality and 'mattering' points out that:

every time an individual changes roles or experiences a transition, the potential for feeling marginal arises. The larger the difference between the former role and the new role the more marginal the person may feel, especially if there are no norms for the new roles (p.7).

She also notes the importance of 'mattering', especially how it relates to the way institutions treat their students. As previously mentioned, there was a consensus within the focus groups that the University is a large bureaucratic place; some felt that the university did not care and that they as individuals did not matter. This appeared to be particularly true for the

65 percent cohort; they felt they mattered even less than the above 73 percent group did. Overall, however, it must be reiterated that all students dealt with identical transitional issues, particularly those which were related to academics issues but also the physical and psychological shifts.

To sum up, based on the findings from these focus group studies, the research and theories on student development that is based on traditional students' experiences can be extended to apply to traditional aged, full time commuter students as well.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Commuter students in this study comprise two different groups of students, those who live with their parents and those who live in off campus private accommodations (apartments and rooming house). There might be some differences between them concerning parental influences on their adaptation to university life. Further research on this area is recommended.

From the focus group results it appears that the argument that family socioeconomic status is not one of the determining factors in student academic achievement needs to be addressed. This hypothesis needs to be confirmed by further research.

The importance of 'mattering' for both students and faculty (Karpiak, in press) in institutions of higher education raises the research question: "Does

the culture of an institution make a difference in its impact on student transition?"



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## **CONSENT FORM**

This form confirms the consent of \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the research project titled, **First Year Undergraduate Student Adaptation to the University of Calgary**, conducted by Shaoyi Li (graduate student) under the supervision of Dr. Alice Boberg in the Department of Education Policy and Administrative Studies . The purpose of the study is to understand the first year undergraduate experiences at this university. We would like to know from you your concerns, needs, the difficulties you are dealing with and your opinions about the academic and social life on this campus.

You are selected randomly from the list of first year undergraduate students provided by the University's Registrar's Office.

I have been informed the purpose and methodology of this research project, the nature of my involvement, and any possible risks to which I may be exposed by virtue of my participation.

I agree to participate in this project by attending the focus group interviews. I understand and agree that:

- \* My participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from this research at any time without penalty.
- \* Participation or non-participation will have no effect on my life at the University of Calgary.
- \* All data will be kept in a secure place inaccessible to others.
- \* Confidentiality and anonymity will be assured. Data will be coded in such a way that I will not be identified and data will be presented in pseudonyms/aliases.
- \* The benefits to participants include:
  - information provided will be useful to policy makers at the university in understanding the different experiences of commuter students.

- academic programs, services etc. will be improved in order to meet students' needs;
- students' university experiences will be enhanced.

\*The risks involved in participating in this study will be no greater risks than those ordinarily incurred in daily life, university life, etc.

I agree to the audio taping of the focus group interview and understand the audiotapes will be erased following completion of the research project.

I understand that the result of this research will be used for M.A thesis and presentation to research groups.

I do not object this additional use of the research data, and give permission to \_\_\_\_\_.

A duplicate copy of the signed consent form is being provided for my records.

I have read the consent form and I understand the nature of my involvement. I agree to participate with the above stated parameters.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature of participant

Date \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any further questions, please contact with:

Shaoyi Li	Tel:220-3185
Dr. Alice Boberg	Tel: 220-7520
The Office of the Chair, Faculty of	
Education Joint Research Ethics Committee	Tel:220-5626
The Office of the Vice-President (Research)	Tel: 220-3381



**Appendix B: Focus groups questions**

1. Do you find university is a big transition for you? Do you feel it is difficult to adjust to university life? What made you feel that way?
2. Do you involve in any on campus activities? What services do you use on campus?
3. Do you commute? Do you have a part-time job? If yes, did they have any influence on your university life?
4. In your opinions, has the university environment exerted any influences on your learning style? Have you given the opportunity to study in groups?
5. What were your expectations on commencing your studies at the U of C? Have your expectations been met?
6. What do you think of the social life /academic life at U of C?  
What aspects of the university life are you most satisfied/ dissatisfied with?
7. Any suggests on what the university could do to make it a better place for students to learn.
8. Jot down what you think to be the critical issues that exert great influence on your academic success.

## Appendix C: Background Information Sheet

### Background Information

(Please fill out the form. Your confidentiality and anonymity will be assured.)

1. Name:

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

4. If you live off campus, do you

\_\_live with your parents

\_\_live with your spouse

\_\_Other (specify)

5. Do you travel to university by:

\_\_Car (or car pool)? \_\_City transit? \_\_Walking or cycling?

6. How much time do you spend travelling to and from campus each day?

\_\_\_\_hours and \_\_\_\_minutes

7. How satisfied are you with your present mode of transportation?

\_\_Very satisfied

\_\_Moderately satisfied

\_\_Neutral

\_\_Moderately dissatisfied

\_\_very dissatisfied

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you have to work to support yourself? \_\_ Yes \_\_ No

9. How long do you have to work each week?

\_\_\_\_\_hours

10. Your parents' occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Your parents' education level: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Your high school Grade Average was: \_\_\_\_\_

13. Your fall session (1995) university Grade Points Average was: \_\_\_\_\_