

# Institutional Analysis, Assessment & Reporting

## What New Freshman Want from their Ideal College and What They Got at Boise State University Research Report 2006-03

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### **Abstract**

*New full-time freshmen were surveyed on the extent to which 15 characteristics would be present at their "ideal" college and how much these characteristics were present during their first semester at Boise State University. The top three characteristics for their ideal college were a schedule of classes that met their needs, faculty who wanted them to succeed, and professors who understood students have lives outside the classroom. These were also the same areas that showed the largest discrepancy between the ideal ratings and the actual ratings of Boise State.*

According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, compared to other institutions, our students do not perceive Boise State University as having a supportive campus environment. Boise State fell very close to the bottom on this benchmark in 2002 and 2004 for both first-year students' and seniors' ratings. Even when scores were adjusted to take into account a variety of institutional information (e.g., admissions selectivity, proportion full-time, proportion living on-campus), Boise State continued to fall far below expectations on this benchmark.

To better understand this issue, new full-time freshmen were surveyed in Fall 2005 on the extent to which a variety of characteristics *would* exist at their ideal college and *did* exist at Boise State University. A total of 625 students completed the survey out of 1,664 surveyed for a response rate of 38%. Ratings were on a four-point scale where "1" corresponded to "very little" and "4" corresponded to "very much."

The areas and items included were as follows:

#### Area 1: Interaction Opportunities:

- Opportunities to get together socially with other students
- Other students that I can form new friendships with
- Places on campus where it's easy to meet with others
- Other students with whom I can study
- Counseling Services

#### Area 2: Set for Success:

- Schedule of classes that meets my needs
- Professors who understand I have a life outside of class
- Faculty who want me to succeed
- Faculty who are intellectually stimulating
- Places on campus where it's easy to study by myself
- A physical arrangement so I can easily get on and off campus

#### Area 3: The Comfort of High School:

- Easy courses
- Old friends who go to my college

#### Area 4: Individual Attention:

- Small classes
- Tutoring if I need it

Students indicated that at their ideal institution, the most important characteristic was being able to get a schedule of classes that met their needs. The next three most important areas all related to faculty. Students desired faculty who wanted them to succeed, who understood there were other things in their lives besides school, and who stimulated them intellectually. Full details can be found in Table 1.

Only one of these items remained in the top four when students rated their experiences at Boise State University: faculty who are intellectually stimulating. The top three Boise State rankings all related to other students. Students indicated that they found places to meet with others, students to form friendships with, and opportunities to get together socially with other students. Only slightly over half (57%) said their schedule met their needs “quite a bit” or “very much.” Almost 60% thought their instructors wanted them to succeed “quite a bit” or “very much.”

Table 2 below shows the difference between actual and ideal ratings. Note that the largest discrepancies are heavily concentrated in the area labeled “Set for Success.” In fact, the three most important items at students’ ideal college were also the ones that showed the largest discrepancies.

Students were also given an open-ended question that asked if there was anything else that their ideal college would have. About a third of the students had additional comments. The comments were read and sorted into 12 categories. Appendix A contains the categories and examples of responses that were given under each category. The greatest number of responses (N=44) fell under the category called “administration.” Most included requests for scheduling classes and for offering other majors. Under “facilities” students made requests for places to eat and hang out (n=34). Under “costs and financial aid” students discussed the costs of tuition and of services such as food and beverages (N=27). Easier parking was also mentioned by 26 students, while more student activities were mentioned by 23 students.

Students were also asked if there was anything else about Boise State University that they’d noticed (good or bad) that we should know about. Over half of the respondents gave feedback to this question. Responses were read and sorted into the same categories used for the previous question (see Appendix B for categories and examples of responses). Again, most responses focused on administration (N=39). Comments were similar to the previous one under “administration,” but advising was added as an issue by a number of students. Parking was also mentioned by some (N=32) and now included feeling safe walking back from the parking lot as an issue. Students also wished that more faculty members would hold discussions in class, be enthusiastic about their teaching, and not pile on so much work. Students generally had good things to say about Boise State facilities in general and the library and recreation center in particular.

We have theorized that perhaps Boise State University students were here because our metropolitan campus fit with their busy lives (e.g., work, family), but that students simultaneously held an idealized image of what college “should be” based on the traditional model of a small residential institution. These results, however, indicate that this does not appear to be the case. The good news is that working on a better schedule of classes for new freshmen and encouraging faculty to interact more with new freshmen should result in a closer fit between students’ ideal and actual versions of college. A closer fit would then lead to increased satisfaction and retention of new freshmen.

Many thanks to Amy Puckett for her help in analyzing the comments section.

**Table 1. Freshman Ratings<sup>1</sup> of their Ideal College and Actual Experiences at Boise State**

Item	Ideal Ratings			Actual Ratings		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
Schedule of classes that meet needs	3.77	.500	1	2.67	.865	7
Faculty who want me to succeed	3.69	.565	2	2.70	.850	6
Professors who understand I have a life	3.64	.652	3	2.30	.842	12
Faculty who are intellectually stimulating	3.59	.617	4	2.76	.809	4
Places to study by myself	3.4	.734	5	2.75	.890	5
Place to meet with others	3.33	.767	6	2.93	.820	1
Students to form friendships with	3.31	.801	7	2.91	.826	2
Physical arrangement to get on/off campus easily	3.28	.825	8	2.47	.915	11
Tutoring if I need it	3.25	.789	9	2.65	.809	8
Opportunities to get together socially with other students	3.19	.841	10	2.86	.854	3
Other students to study with	3.17	.853	11	2.62	.880	9
Old friends who go to my college	2.97	.953	12	2.07	1.031	15
Small classes	2.76	.830	13	2.27	.683	13
Counseling services	2.75	.932	14	2.61	.840	10
Easy courses	2.46	.893	15	2.17	.679	14

<sup>1</sup> Where 1=very little, 2=some, 3=quite a bit, 4=very much

**Table 2. Differences Between Ideal College Ratings and Ratings of Boise State University**

Item	Perceived Discrepancy (Actual-Ideal)		
	Mean <sup>2</sup>	Standard Deviation	Area
Professors who understand I have a life outside class	-1.3415	1.08743	Set for success
Schedule of classes that meet needs	-1.1046	0.98375	Set for success
Faculty who want me to succeed	-.9884	0.95236	Set for success
Old friends who go to my college	-.9097	1.27219	Comfort of high school
Faculty who are stimulating	-.8309	0.92798	Set for success
Physical arrangement to get on/off campus easily	-.8039	1.19633	Set for success
Places to study by myself	-.6481	1.12012	Set for success
Tutoring	-.5987	1.05508	Individual attention
Other students to study with	-.5401	1.12917	Interaction opportunities
Small classes	-.5088	1.04994	Individual attention
Students to form friendships with	-.4046	0.97452	Interaction opportunities
Places to meet with others	-.4010	1.07028	Interaction opportunities
Opportunities to get together with other students	-.3311	1.1194	Interaction opportunities
Easy courses	-.3053	1.05589	Comfort of high school
Counseling services	-.1400	1.0492	Interaction opportunities

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<sup>2</sup> Means were calculated by finding the difference in ratings for each student and then taking the average for the group.