

**The “Real College Experience”:  
The Transition from Anticipation to Actuality  
for CSU, Chico’s Second-Semester Freshmen**

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Introduction

The transition from high school to college can be a stressful time in a student’s life. Universities work hard to make this transition as smooth as possible by conducting orientations, encouraging residence hall living, and providing special courses for freshmen that span their first semester but some students still seem to have a harder time than others. What kind of obstacles do students anticipate they will encounter when they begin college? What kind of obstacles to a successful transition do they actually encounter when they arrive? Where do they go for help with these obstacles? The current study attempted to answer these and other questions about the transition to college and students’ actual collegiate experience by surveying a group of Fall 1999 freshmen in their second semester at CSU, Chico.

The survey focused on students’ anticipated and encountered obstacles in three areas: academic, financial, and social. Previous research found that these three areas had a significant impact on students’ college transition, success, and ultimate completion. In addition, the survey asked where, or to whom, students went for support if they encountered academic or financial difficulties. The survey assessed the students’ social

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integration, their satisfaction with the university, their thoughts about dropping out, and their sense of having a “real college experience” at CSU, Chico. The following sections review the literature about students’ college experiences, how they interrelate, and how they lead to success or failure in the college environment.

### The Academic Experience

According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), academic experience can best be grouped into five categories: 1) acquiring knowledge; 2) developing the cognitive structure; 3) acquiring or modifying sociopolitical and gender role attitudes and values; 4) building academic self-concept; and 5) learning to know yourself and relating to others. These categories often are presented in most classrooms, but they are also common in the co-curricular lives of students, especially categories three, four, and five. When students anticipate going to college, they are most familiar with classroom learning from their previous school experience. Very little prepares them for the academic development that goes on in their life at college outside the classroom. Jorgensen-Earp and Staton (1993) stated that the adjustment of entering college exceeds the adjustments previously made going from grade to grade in students’ pre-collegiate experience. Students bring high hopes and high expectations to the freshman experience (Boyer, 1987) and that anticipation may lead to tension when expectation and fulfillment fail to meet (Jorgensen-Earp & Staton, 1993.) Tinto (1987) investigated student attrition from college and found that close to 50% of freshmen entered college concerned about facing academic difficulty, lacking leadership skills, needing social enhancement, and being able to benefit from personal and career counseling. Students’ receptivity to support services, as well as their coping skills, and their initial impression of the college were influential in completing their degree.

In a study of African American students matriculating to predominately white institutions, Brown (2000) stated that women were better academic achievers than men in high school but when they entered college, they experienced a drop in academic performance. In Brown's study, students used a moderate number of the colleges' support resources (average usage 6 –7 out of the 22 available) but needed different types of support depending on their gender. Men needed more instrumental support (advising, guidance) while women needed both instrumental and emotional support (college staff mentoring, caring, and comfort). In past research, Hood (1992) found that, while African American men were happier than women at predominately white colleges, they ran a greater risk of leaving college due to academic dismissal. Women were more likely to leave college because of dissatisfaction and, in 1997, Taylor and Olswang suggested that the dissatisfaction might stem from the intersection of racism and sexism found at predominately white colleges to which the women, more than men, were exposed. Expectations of college, dissatisfaction with college, academic success, and the need for and type of support services used differed by gender for these African American students at predominately white institutions.

Social networks influenced the academic experience of students also. Freshmen came to college and, within the first four weeks, chose friends with high school grade point averages (GPA) that were similar to their own (Salzinger, Antrobus, & Hammer, 1988.) There also was a strong positive relationship, at the end of the first year in college, between a student's GPA and the average GPA for the network of friends he or she developed during that year. While the size of students' social networks developed in the first year may positively influence retention, it also could be detrimental to academic performance. In some cases, Salzinger et al. found that academic excellence became

secondary to the pleasure of enjoying the peer relationships. Positive influences on GPA have been found for doing more activities with fewer people, rather than simply the participating in a large number of events or doing things with a large social network.

The “freshman academic experience” was shown in the literature reviewed to be multidimensional and influenced by the social network students formed, the gender and ethnicity of the student, as well as the fulfillment of the expectations of the new student.

### The Financial Experience

There has not been much research conducted or hypotheses offered about students’ anticipation of financial difficulties before attending college. Universities often help students prepare for college by providing information about scholarships, financial aid and campus employment. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) indicated that students who received financial aid had a higher graduation rate, tended more often to graduate in four years, and go on to graduate school at a higher rate than those who did not receive aid. They also found that financial aid that must be worked for, on a part-time basis, and was on campus (eg., a work study job), had a positive impact on students’ graduation rates.

Salzinger, Antrobus, & Hammer (1988), investigated questions relating to the impact of social networks, finances, and work on students at two colleges—a large, ethnically diverse, urban college drawing students from a financially impoverished area and a smaller, suburban, homogeneous, middle class commuter college. These two college groups differed on many variables but were similar in the findings that students who worked had higher GPAs than students who didn’t and their GPAs increased as work hours increased, up to 30 hours. Fifty-eight percent of the urban college population held jobs, and worked an average of 17 hour a week. In general, working did not influence dropping out of college for this population. African American students at the

urban college were an exception. They listed financial trouble more frequently than other students did as a reason for dropping-out of college (financial reasons accounted for 20% of the variance in dropout behavior for African American students compared to 7% of the variance accounted for in dropout behavior for others.)

While students may not have anticipated financial difficulties, some encountered them and some created them when they got to college. Literature on effective support for financial difficulties was sparse. Salzinger, et al. (1988) suggested that, in providing students with jobs, those relationships in the working environment may have provided additional social support for students' stress which led to fewer students dropping out of college. Students who worked because they were experiencing financial difficulties may have found that they benefited in more ways than just overcoming financial obstacles. The social support may have helped alleviate some stress in their academic life as well.

### The Social Experience

Research indicated that successful college students have gained academic and social integration into the campus community. Jorgensen-Earp and Staton (1993) cited three socialization stages which they applied to students entering the university: 1) anticipatory socialization, (i.e., what students expect will happen based on their past experience and what they have heard about the new environment), 2) entry stage, (i.e., when they actually begin socialization in the environment), and 3) continuance or adaptation, (i.e., when they have settled in to the environment.)

Brown, et al. (1987) found that if students had unrealistic expectations, expected too much of others, or lacked the social skills to reciprocate in the formation of a social network, the student was likely to lose the network for support. With 50% of the students who entered college needing social enhancement (McGrath & Braunstein, 1993), the

social network they surround themselves with, therefore, could be fragile and endangered. College relationships, in the first year, were often unstable (Salzinger, Antrobus, and Hammer, 1988.) In their first semester, students find people like themselves with whom to bond (similar GPA, similar ethnicity, same gender, language, and culture.) But Salzinger, et al. found that by four months into the academic year (at the end of one semester), student groups were ethnically integrated which lent additional support to previous research that showed students tended to cultivate friends from different racial/ethnic groups as they continued their education. Salzinger, et al. suggested that during the first semester students were looking for a social network to belong to rather than getting support from their social network. The social network as a support system came later in their college career.

Traditional 18- to 22-year-old students seldom attempted to include older students in their social network. Negative attitudes were as prevalent when Schwalb and Sedlacek (1990) conducted a study during freshman orientation at the University of Maryland in 1988 as they were in the 1970s, when a similar study was conducted. Given scenarios with older students' ages specified and some with the students' age unspecified, the freshmen consistently expressed negative attitudes toward the older, age-specified students in the scenarios. The freshmen were most negative about older students in close social situations. Academic situations generated slightly fewer negative attitudes among the freshmen, but attitudes were still negative toward older students compared to attitudes toward students of an unspecified age. Women's attitudes were more negative than men's when presented with scenarios proposing a blind date with an older student and being assigned an older study partner. Men's attitudes were more negative than women's when faced with a scenario of an older student at an intramural team tryout. The only exception

to the general negativity was in the scenario of breaking into line—freshmen thought it was more acceptable for older students to do this than students of an unspecified age. Schwalb and Sedlacek suggested that perhaps the freshmen felt pity for the older students in this case.

Social participation, according to Hanks and Eckland (1976), for both men and women, was an important factor in their educational attainment. It has also been found that living on campus has a positive effect on students' persistence and completion of their four-year degree, mainly because it facilitated campus involvement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Membership in Greek organizations also was shown to have a positive influence on students' continued persistence and final completion of their degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Astin (1984), however, stated that students who dropped out of college may have been over-involved in one area, i.e. had many close on-campus friendships that distracted them from involvement in other areas, such as studying or academic achievement.

Other students were not the only significant relationships encountered by new college arrivals. Faculty played an important part in the social integration of students into the campus community. Braxton, Bray, and Berger (2000) found that classroom learning environments and faculty teaching skills each had a direct positive relationship to students' social integration, especially in the students' first year. The relationship between in-class and out-of-class experience has often been stated in terms of how the out-of-class experience supports and supplements the in-class experience. Seldom has the effect of in-class experience on students' out-of-class social integration into the campus community been evaluated. Braxton, et al. concluded from their investigations at two large eastern colleges that faculty members with better teaching skills and better

classroom learning environments produced students who were more socially integrated to the campus which, in turn, supported student retention. The better integrated a student was into the campus community, the better able the student was to combat stresses caused by the transition to the campus and to meet the demands of academic rigor. The well-integrated student developed a commitment to the campus that counteracted thoughts of dropping out or transfer.

### College Satisfaction

Student retention also depended on how students perceived the campus itself. Tinto (1987) found that 75% of students leave in the first two years of college. Most were voluntary departures and most were in the first year. Tinto also found that 63 % of the students he surveyed who left had had a negative initial impression of the campus (low satisfaction ratings on the cost of tuition, the adequacy of financial aid, the student body, college athletics, and living arrangements.) Of the factors that predicted retention for his sample, the first semester GPA was the most important but the second most important factor was students' impressions of other students.

In Brown's (2000) study, African American students differed by gender in their satisfaction with the predominately white institution they attended; men were happier with the institution than women. This supported the findings by Hood (1992) who observed that more African American women left predominately white institutions from dissatisfaction with the college while more men left from academic dismissal. Brown also noted that using the available campus resources when they were needed did not influence all students' satisfaction with the university equally. Women's satisfaction with the university was enhanced by using campus resources but only when paired with advice and guidance from their home environment.

Satisfaction with the university, then, seemed to come from a person-environment fit much like Murray and Lewin hypothesized in 1938 (Brown, et al.) Satisfaction depended on how much students wanted to be at the university and how much the university delivered on the promise that attracted the student in the first place. Finding the right student/college fit was important to minimize stress during the transition period. University support services, designed to relieve student stress, were only helpful in reducing that stress if students' perceived them as supportive. If students did not perceive a support service as "good" support, the failure to have their needs met increased their life-event stress. Brown, et al., suggested that "good" support was not a buffer for student stress; it just didn't add any more stress by being another unmet need in a students' life.

The average student's transition from high school to college was a complex life experience as reported in the literature reviewed here. Many variables made that transition easier or harder, and some influenced whether the student remained, dropped out or transferred. Regardless of the safety net provided by the university or college, the students' satisfaction with the transitional experience could not be guaranteed. The current study asked CSU, Chico second-semester freshmen to tell us what they worried about before they arrived, what obstacles they found after they were settled and, if they had problems once they were here, where they went for help. We also explored their level of social integration, their satisfaction with the campus, and related the results to their thoughts about dropping out of college. We wanted to know if our students felt that they were having a "real college experience" at Chico, and so we asked them.

## Method

### Participants

A random sample of 600 second-semester freshmen attending California State University, Chico was drawn for this survey. Four hundred and nine students agreed to participate in the telephone survey process. The remaining students either declined or were not available when the contact was made and were, subsequently, never reached.

### Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was designed initially by the Student Affairs Assessment Committee. A subset of those items was used in this study, the first in a series of planned assessments, and is found in the Appendix. The questions were adapted to telephone delivery by the staff at the CSU, Chico Survey Research Center (SRC) who designed a script to be read to the participants by their callers. The majority of the questions asked were open-ended and allowed students to provide answers from their own experience rather than choose answers suggested by the caller. Questions focused on students' expectations of academic, financial, and social obstacles that they would experience upon entry to college and what their actual experiences in these areas were after they arrived. If they had experienced any obstacles in these areas, they were asked to whom or where did they go to find support. The survey also contained questions about students' level of comfort with others who were like, and who were not like, them. Lastly, the survey included questions about their satisfaction with aspects of college life, the campus itself, and whether they felt that they were having "a real college experience" at CSU, Chico.

## Procedure

The Survey Research Center (SRC) was given the survey instrument and a sample of six hundred second-semester college students' names and telephone numbers. The Center used experienced callers who were also students attending California State University, Chico. The callers met for a training session on March 10, 2000. They were to ask any questions they had regarding the survey at that time. As in the past, the callers were to record the responses to the survey via a computer at their station. Remote listening equipment was available to listen to the process of the interviewing. Neither the interviewer nor the interviewee had knowledge that a third party was listening.

Once the callers reached and had completed 409 surveys, the data was compiled. Responses of "other" that were not originally coded were recoded into categories as they fit. Then selected demographic data, including major, ethnicity, unit load, basis of admission, need for remediation, and Chico grade point average were merged with the survey data to complete the file.

## Results

The ethnicity and gender of participants in the study were representative of the general population of students attending California State University, Chico. The students in the survey were carrying an average of 12 units, had an average GPA of 2.65, ( $SD = .83$ ) and 40 majors (plus "undeclared") were represented among the survey participants. Each college at CSU, Chico was represented in the responding group. Table 1 contains the demographic information that describes the survey participants.

Table 1.

Demographic Information of Second-Semester Freshmen in Survey Sample (N = 409).

| <u>Demographics</u>              | <u>n</u> | <u>% of sample</u> |
|----------------------------------|----------|--------------------|
| Gender                           |          |                    |
| Female                           | 230      | 56                 |
| Male                             | 179      | 44                 |
| Ethnicity                        |          |                    |
| White (not Hispanic)             | 260      | 64                 |
| Mexican, Mex Amer., Chicano      | 44       | 10                 |
| Other Asian                      | 11       | 3                  |
| African American                 | 10       | 2                  |
| Latino, Spanish-origin, Hispanic | 8        | 2                  |
| South American                   | 4        | 1                  |
| Other Southeast Asian            | 4        | 1                  |
| American Indian, Alaskan Native  | 3        | 1                  |
| Other                            | 16       | 4                  |
| Decline to State                 | 13       | 3                  |
| No Response                      | 36       | 9                  |
| Unit Load                        |          |                    |
| 6 and fewer                      | 50       | 12                 |
| 7 to 12                          | 217      | 52                 |
| 13 to 17                         | 111      | 28                 |
| 18 and over                      | 31       | 8                  |

Academic questions.

Table 2 contains the comparison of students' anticipated (Question 1) and encountered (Question 2) academic obstacles.

Table 2.

Number and Percent of Common Anticipated and Encountered Academic Obstacles.

| <u>Academic Obstacles</u> | <u>Anticipated (n = 403)</u> |          | <u>Encountered (n = 406)</u> |          |    |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|----------|----|
|                           | <u>n</u>                     | <u>%</u> | <u>n</u>                     | <u>%</u> |    |
| None                      | 99                           | 25       | 41                           | 10       |    |
| Partying/social life      | 56                           | 14       | 24                           | 6        |    |
| Course Requirements       | 31                           | 8        | 53                           | 13       |    |
| Courses too hard          | 28                           | 7        | 20                           | 5        |    |
| Residence hall life       | 25                           | 6        | 21                           | 5        |    |
| Lack of preparation       | 14                           | 4        | 4                            | 1        |    |
| Harder testing            | 7                            | 2        | 19                           | 5        |    |
| Writing skills            | 3                            | 1        | 11                           | 3        |    |
| Other:                    | 137                          | 35       | Other:                       | 133      | 33 |
| Study habits              | 8                            | 2        | Study habits                 | 20       | 5  |
| Morning classes           | 7                            | 2        | Skip class                   | 16       | 4  |
| Jobs                      | 17                           | 4        | Jobs                         | 6        | 1  |
| Time Mgmt                 | 17                           | 4        | Time Mgmt                    | 65       | 16 |
| Freedom                   | 25                           | 6        | Roommates                    | 5        | 1  |
| Sports & Recreation       | 6                            | 1        | Procrastination              | 33       | 8  |
| Drinking & Drugs          | 4                            | <1       |                              |          |    |

Note: Columns do not add to 100 %. Only most common responses were summarized.

Fully a quarter of the freshmen surveyed expected no obstacles to their academic success. In practice, only 10% found that to be the case. For some, the anticipated academic obstacles never materialized and yet new obstacles took their place. Some stated they were “not morning people” and the thought of early classes presented an anticipated obstacle to their grades. After arriving at Chico State, twice as many students as those who said they were “not morning people” responded that “skipping class” presented an obstacle to achieving their grades. “Time management”, mentioned by only 4% of the surveyed students as an anticipated obstacle, was deemed a problem by 16% of the second-semester students after they had experienced some classes at CSU, Chico. There was no significant difference between the responses of men and women but, of those students who declared their ethnicity, White students anticipated more impact of partying and social life on their grades than did Non-White students ( $W(17\%, \underline{n} = 43) > NW(9\%, \underline{n} = 10); \chi^2 = 22.59, \underline{df} = 12, p < .03$ ). Over twice as many Non-White students as White students anticipated that the “lack of high school preparation” and that “writing papers” would be obstacles to their academic achievement. Neither group, however, reported experiencing these as obstacles in their first semester at college.

Those students who stated they needed academic support in Question 3 (88%,  $\underline{n} = 363$ ), sought that support most frequently from friends (23%,  $\underline{n} = 82$ ), their instructor (15%,  $\underline{n} = 55$ ), and family (14%,  $\underline{n} = 53$ ). Some students who needed support, never received support (11%,  $\underline{n} = 38$ ). Non-White students sought support at the Student Learning Center significantly more often than White students did ( $NW(13\%, \underline{n} = 13) > W(3\%, \underline{n} = 7); \chi^2 = 22.69, \underline{df} = 10, p < .01$ .)

When asked in Question 4 about what had the greatest negative impact on their grades, 15 % ( $\underline{n} = 57$ ) of the students said “nothing.” The remaining second-semester

students confessed to a lack of self-discipline and motivation (30 %,  $n = 122$ ) and to “partying” too often (13%,  $n = 51$ ). Other students also listed a variety of class-related (classes too large, too early, hard testing, too much work), time-related (not enough time, procrastination, lack of time management skills) and social-related (residence halls too distracting, too much social life) impacts. Finally, not going to class and not preparing or studying enough for class also were mentioned.

### Financial questions.

Students were asked in Question 5 if they had encountered financial difficulties in their transition to college life. Almost two-thirds of the students responded that they had not (64%,  $n = 260$ .) For the students who stated they had experienced financial difficulties (36%,  $n = 147$ ), Table 3 lists possible sources of difficulty and the number of students who reported experiencing each (Questions 6 - 12.)

Table 3.

#### Possible sources of students' financial difficulties (n = 147.)

| Source of Financial Difficulty         | <u>Having This Difficulty</u> |           |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------|
|  | n                             | %         |
| Budgeting your money                   | 120                           | 82        |
| Excessive credit card use              | 24                            | 16        |
| Financial aid problems                 | 39                            | 27        |
| Money conflicts with family            | 67                            | 46        |
| Spend too much on free time activities | 104                           | 71        |
| Buying non-essential items             | 100                           | 68        |
| <u>Putting aside for emergencies</u>   | <u>77</u>                     | <u>52</u> |

More women said they had experienced financial difficulties with the transition to college than men (W(63%,  $n = 93$ ) > M(37%,  $n = 54$ );  $\chi^2 = 4.90$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .03$ .) The difficulties for women stemmed from excessive credit card use (W(20%,  $n = 19$ ) > M(9%,  $n = 5$ );  $\chi^2 = 3.12$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .07$ ) and buying non-essential items (W(74%,  $n = 69$ ) > M(57%,  $n = 31$ );  $\chi^2 = 4.42$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .03$ .) Non-White students stated that financial aid was a source of their financial problems more often than White students did (NW (40%,  $n = 17$ ) > W(22%,  $n = 20$ );  $\chi^2 = 4.66$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .03$ .) When students who reported financial difficulties were asked to whom or where they went for support (Question 13), over two-thirds of the students responded that they went to their parents or other family members (67%,  $n = 101$ .) The other sources of support mentioned were split evenly among getting a job, taking out loans or financial aid, and going to friends. Nine percent of the students stated that, although they needed it, they received no help at all.

#### Social life questions.

Students were asked in Question 14 what worries they might have had about obstacles to their college social life before they came to CSU, Chico. Over half the students indicated that they had not anticipated encountering any social obstacles. For those who did anticipate an obstacle, the most frequently named obstacle was trouble making new friends. The concern of over a quarter of the students surveyed, that they would have trouble making new friends when they arrived at college, did not come to fruition. Only 5 % ( $n = 10$ ) of the second-semester freshmen reported in Question 15 that it was difficult to make new friends when they got to CSU, Chico.

What some did find, regarding social life at college, was that there was too much of it; 11 % ( $n = 21$ ) stated that this was the case. Women had anticipated more obstacles to a college social life than men did but there was no difference in what they encountered

when they arrived. There were no differences between White and Non-White students, either in their anticipated or encountered obstacles to college social life. Table 4 lists the anticipated and encountered social obstacles as reported by our surveyed students.

Table 4.

Number and percent of common anticipated and encountered social obstacles.

| Obstacles to Social Life   | <u>Anticipated (n = 407)</u> |           | <u>Encountered (n = 401)</u> |           |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|
|                            | n                            | %         | n                            | %         |
| None                       | 214                          | 53        | 284                          | 69        |
| Choice of residence        | 3                            | 1         | 2                            | 1         |
| Roommate issues            | 14                           | 3         | 7                            | 4         |
| Trouble making new friends | 107                          | 26        | 10                           | 5         |
| Dating issues              | 1                            | < 1       | 5                            | 3         |
| Alcohol Consumption        | 6                            | 2         | 7                            | 4         |
| Frat/Soror Acceptance      | 2                            | <1        | 0                            | 0         |
| Sexual issues              | 1                            | <1        | 0                            | 0         |
| Too much social life       | 0                            | 0         | 21                           | 11        |
| Recreational drug use      | 0                            | 0         | 1                            | <1        |
| <u>Other issues</u>        | <u>59</u>                    | <u>15</u> | <u>64</u>                    | <u>16</u> |

To assess the freshmen students' social integration to campus in their second semester, Questions 17 – 23 asked students how comfortable they were interacting with a variety of people on campus. They were to respond whether they were very comfortable, somewhat comfortable, somewhat uncomfortable or very uncomfortable in their interactions with others. Almost all students responded as having generally comfortable interactions with most students. Table 5 contains a summary of their responses.

Table 5.

Students' comfort level in interactions with others on campus.

| Comfortable interacting with<br>students who are.... | Percent of students |                    |            |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|------------|
|  | V+SW Comfortable    | V+SW Uncomfortable | Don't Know |
| From your racial/ethnic group                        | 97                  | 2                  | <1         |
| From other racial/ethnic group                       | 97                  | 3                  | 0          |
| Persons of the same gender                           | 98                  | 2                  | 0          |
| Persons of the opposite gender                       | 96                  | 4                  | 0          |
| Physically or mentally challenged                    | 86                  | 7                  | 7          |
| Traditionally aged students (18 – 22)                | 99                  | 1                  | 0          |
| <u>Re-entry students (over 25)</u>                   | <u>88</u>           | <u>7</u>           | <u>5</u>   |

Almost all of the second-semester freshmen surveyed stated they were comfortable or very comfortable with most types of students found on the college campus. The only students the freshmen stated that they were somewhat uncomfortable with were older students and physically or mentally challenged students. A few students were not sure how comfortable they were with others and responded "I don't know." When White and Non-White students' responses were compared, the Non-White students were significantly more uncomfortable with students of their own racial/ethnic group, other racial/ethnic groups and students of their own gender. The number of students who reported both their ethnicity and stated that they were uncomfortable was very small, so the statistical significance was suspect. There were no differences between the way men and women reported feeling about any of these groups of students.

Students' overall college experience was the last area investigated. The freshmen were asked how satisfied they were with CSU, Chico and some aspects of college life

(Questions 26 - 35.) Table 6 contains the satisfaction questions and the number and percent of students responding “very” and “somewhat” satisfied or “very” and “somewhat” dissatisfied.

Table 6.

Students’ satisfaction with their college and college life (n = 409.)

| Area of Satisfaction                     | Satisfied (V + Sw) |     | Dissatisfied (Sw + V) |    | DK  |
|--|--------------------|-----|-----------------------|----|-----|
|  | N                  | %   | n                     | %  | %   |
| Overall academic experience              | 392                | 96  | 17                    | 4  |     |
| Your personal growth                     | 399                | 98  | 9                     | 2  | <1  |
| Your participation in student activities | 326                | 80  | 60                    | 15 | 6   |
| Class size                               | 385                | 94  | 23                    | 6  | <1  |
| Classroom technologies                   | 370                | 91  | 33                    | 8  | 1   |
| Computer facilities                      | 350                | 86  | 26                    | 6  | 8   |
| Library facilities                       | 390                | 95  | 10                    | 3  | 2   |
| Parking                                  | 74                 | 28  | 257                   | 63 | 19* |
| Your personal safety                     | 393                | 96  | 16                    | 4  |     |
| Campus appearance                        | 409                | 100 | 0                     | 0  |     |

\*18% have no car; 1% DK

Parking continued to be a source of general dissatisfaction for Chico State students; almost two-thirds of the students in this survey who had cars reported that they were dissatisfied with parking. Parking was assumed to refer to cars because 19% of the students surveyed stated that they had no cars and indicated that they didn’t know if parking was a problem or not. Bicycles and motorcycle/scooter parking was not addressed.

While most students were satisfied with their personal safety, there were, however, differences between men and women and between Non-White and White students in their responses. A larger proportion of women (7%) and Non-White (6%) students surveyed were less satisfied with their personal safety than men (<1%) and White students (3%) surveyed. Once again, the number of students who stated their ethnicity who were dissatisfied were small so the statistical significance was suspect for that comparison. And while most students reported that they were satisfied with their personal growth, women stated they were satisfied significantly more often (W(64% satisfied,  $n = 228$ ) > M (54%,  $n = 171$ )) than men did ( $\chi^2 = 7.11$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .03$ .)

Next, students were asked if they had ever thought about dropping out of college and, if so, why (Questions 24 and 25.) Only 14% ( $n = 58$ ) of the students surveyed had considered dropping out of school by the middle of their second semester as freshmen. Of the subset of students who had considered dropping out of college, men had considered dropping out significantly more often than women (M(18%,  $n = 33$ ) > W(11%,  $n = 25$ );  $\chi^2 = 4.73$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .03$ .) “Academic” reasons (41%) were listed by this subset most often for dropping out followed by “personal” reasons (21%). Only 10 % of those who considered dropping out, did so for “financial” reasons.

Finally, a intentionally vague question (Question 36) about how often students felt they were having a “real college experience” at CSU, Chico was asked. The question allowed students to interpret what that meant for themselves. The second-semester freshmen were quite positive that they were having a “real college experience”; 86% responded “always” and “almost always.” An additional 14% replied “sometimes.” Responses to this question affirmed that these freshmen students saw that CSU, Chico offered them a genuine chance to experience college life.

## Discussion

The second-semester freshmen students surveyed at CSU, Chico were mostly comfortable with each other, satisfied with the college and college life, and were not thinking about dropping out. They felt they were having a real college experience at Chico. While some students anticipated problems arising from their transition to college life in the academic and social areas, the obstacles they actually faced were fewer and different from those they had imagined. Some were related; like concerns with the new freedom experienced with living away from home and the actual academic problems caused by skipping class and not keeping up with assignments. Some were unexpected; like the anticipatory fear of not being able to make new friends on campus and the actual experience, which was just the reverse. Students had no trouble making new friends. In fact, forging friendships was so easy that it created an unanticipated problem: too intense a social life in the residence halls. Some reported that they had trouble settling in to do academics because the residence halls, and their friends, were so stimulating.

The areas of academics, social life, and financial status are intertwined and what impacts one is felt throughout the entire fabric of the students' life. The following concerns surfaced from the surveyed students' responses:

- A lack of time management skills
- Too little knowledge of course requirements
- The presence of too much social life
- A general dissatisfaction with parking
- An excessive use of credit cards, especially among women
- Excessive purchasing of non-essential items, especially among women
- Spending too much money on free time activities

- Budgeting problems in general
- Financial Aid problems for Non-White students
- Feeling uncomfortable with students who are older or mentally challenged or physically challenged
- Dissatisfaction with their own participation in student activities

The data suggested that there is room for personal growth in relating to students who were physically and mentally challenged. The university provides a unique opportunity for individuals to interact with people unlike themselves and to share a common purpose: education, development, and growth. The love of a discipline, the completion of a project, or the intensity of a classroom conversation can bond students to those that, had they not been engaged in the common purpose of obtaining an education, they never would have encountered in their daily lives. The same can happen with older and younger students—there needs to be a positive, equally-gainful interaction between old and young students according to Schwalb and Sedlacek. Classrooms are good environments for those experiences to happen but out-of-class experiences may be even more important.

Time management, stress management, and study skills are powerful tools to fight against the obstacles to achievement cited by the second-semester freshmen. These are skills that can be taught. Passive offerings of these skills do not take advantage of Chico's unique residential environment where students can soak up the necessary life skills to survive and be academically successful without leaving their hall. Move the skills training out of the library and into the residence halls; make them a part of students' everyday experience.

Proactive intervention by Financial Aid counselors could alleviate some of the stress created by students who have neither the skill nor the will to budget. No aid disbursed without an approved budget from the student might make students think about the money more realistically. The removal of the credit card vendors from campus was a good first step toward responsible credit use by students but more needs to be done. The buying of non-essential items and the excessive use of credit cards, especially by women students, can cause severe problems when it is time to purchase books for the second semester.

### Recommendations

1. Begin workshops in the residence halls focusing on study skills, time management skills, and stress reduction.
2. Make Financial Counselors available to Aid recipients and non-Aid recipients to work on budgeting, understanding credit card debt, and differentiating between “need” and “want”, essential and non-essential spending.
3. Create co-curricular opportunities for differently-abled, traditional, and older students to participate in mutually beneficial activities where they can interrelate in a meaningful way.
4. Continue funding research activities via surveys, focus groups, or other methods to assess changes in attitudes and socialization as student continue to adapt to the college campus.

### Further Research

Further investigation of students’ perceptions of the helpfulness of the support services offered at CSU, Chico could be fruitful. If students do not see a support service or agency as “good”, what would it need to do differently to achieve that standing?

Students' perception of the quality of support is more important than the size of the service, the personnel, or the resources available. In addition, the question about students' satisfaction with participation in student activities, was not clearly stated enough to know if students were dissatisfied with their own participation in student activities, others' participation in student activities, or just a vague dissatisfaction with student activities. This also could be explored further to gauge students' opinion of student activities as well as services on campus in a clearer way.

A snapshot of upper division students might be helpful to assess their third phase of socialization, the continuation and adaption phase (Jorgensen-Earp & Staton, 1993.) Spring 2001 would be a good time to look at second-semester juniors who have persisted at CSU, Chico and see how their attitudes, activities, and opinions may have changed since they participated in Astin's CIRP study in all 1998 as incoming freshmen at CSU, Chico.

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## Appendix

**STUDENT SERVICES SURVEY 2000**

1. Before attending classes at Chico State, what obstacles did you anticipate might effect your grades? (Open ended)
  - 1) courses requirements (amount of work)
  - 2) level of course difficult (due to lack of high school preparation)
  - 3) harder testing
  - 4) competition for grades among other students
  - 5) writing papers and/or reports
  - 6) disliking course subject matter
  - 7) accommodations for disabilities not provided
  - 8) disliking teacher
  - 9) Other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 0) No obstacles
  
2. Now that you've experienced some classes—what has turned out to be the most difficult obstacle effecting your grades? (Open ended)
  - 1) course requirements (amount of work)
  - 2) level of course difficult (due to lack of high school preparation)
  - 3) harder testing
  - 4) competition for grades among other students
  - 5) writing papers and/or reports
  - 6) disliking course subject matter
  - 7) accommodations for disabilities not provided
  - 8) disliking teacher
  - 9) Other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 0) No obstacle effects grades
  
3. When dealing with academic obstacles, where have you found support? (Open ended)
  - 1) roommates
  - 2) friends
  - 3) classmates
  - 4) student study groups
  - 5) the instructor
  - 6) family
  - 7) Student Learning Center
  - 8) Disability Support Services
  - 9) Other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_
  - 0) experienced no academic obstacles

4. What do you think has had the greatest negative impact on your grades?

(Open ended)

- 1) Not doing assignments and/or reading
- 2) Partying too often
- 3) Poor course/major selection
- 4) Lack of self-discipline
- 5) Motivation to study
- 6) No place to study
- 7) Going home too often
- 8) Don't Know
- 9) Other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_
- 0) No negative impacts

5. Have you experienced any financial difficulties in your transition to college life? (Open ended)

- 1) Yes (continue to Question 6)
- 2) No (go to Question 14)
- 3) Unsure (go to Question 14)
- 4) Decline to Answer (go to Question 14)

If you have experienced any of the following financial difficulties, please indicate yes or no. (Give choices)

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 6. budgeting your money                             | Y | N |
| 7. excessive credit card use                        | Y | N |
| 8. financial aid problems                           | Y | N |
| 9. money conflicts with family                      | Y | N |
| 10. spending too much money on free time activities | Y | N |
| 11. buying non-essential items                      | Y | N |
| 12. trouble putting money aside for emergencies     | Y | N |

13. When dealing with financial difficulties, where have you found support?

(Open ended)

- 1) Your parents
- 2) other family members
- 3) financial aid
- 4) a job
- 5) take out a loan(s)
- 6) friends
- 7) Scholarships
- 8) Decline to Answer
- 9) Other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_

14. What worries did you have regarding your social life when thinking about attending Chico State? (Open ended)

- 1) Choice of residence
- 2) roommate related issues
- 3) trouble in making new friends
- 4) getting accepted into a *fraternity*(if male) or *sorority*(if female)
- 5) dating related issues
- 6) sexual issues
- 7) alcohol consumption
- 8) recreational drug use
- 9) other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_
- 0) didn't have any worries

15. Now that you have experienced social life at Chico State, what have you found most difficult about your social life? (Open ended)

- 1) choice of residence
- 2) roommate related issues
- 3) trouble in making new friends
- 4) getting accepted into a *fraternity*(if male) or *sorority*(if female)
- 5) dating related issues
- 6) sexual issues
- 7) alcohol consumption
- 8) recreational drug use
- 9) other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_
- 0) didn't have any worries

16. Question 16 deleted.

Would you say you were comfortable, pretty comfortable, or not very comfortable when interacting with students on campus who are: (Give choices)

- |                                       |   |   |    |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|----|
| 17. from your racial/ethnic group     | C | P | NV |
| 18. from other racial/ethnic groups   | C | P | NV |
| 19. of the same gender                | C | P | NV |
| 20. of the opposite gender            | C | P | NV |
| 21. physically or mentally challenged | C | P | NV |
| 22. traditionally aged (18-22)        | C | P | NV |
| 23. re-entry students (25+)           | C | P | NV |

24. Have you ever considered dropping out of school? (Open ended)
- 1) yes (continue to Question 25)
  - 2) no (go to Question 26)
25. Why did you consider dropping out of school? (Open ended)
- 1) financial reasons
  - 2) academic reasons
  - 3) personal reasons
  - 4) medical health status
  - 5) mental health status
  - 6) didn't like school
  - 7) decline to answer
  - 8) don't know
  - 9) other (fill in) \_\_\_\_\_
26. Would you say you were *very satisfied*, *pretty satisfied*, or *not very satisfied* with the following: (Give choices)
- |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 26. overall academic experience         | V | P | N |
| 27. personal growth                     | V | P | N |
| 28. participation in student activities | V | P | N |
| 29. class size                          | V | P | N |
| 30. classroom technologies              | V | P | N |
| 31. computer facilities                 | V | P | N |
| 32. library facilities                  | V | P | N |
| 33. parking                             | V | P | N |
| 34. your personal safety                | V | P | N |
| 35. appearance of campus                | V | P | N |
36. Overall, how often do you feel like you are having a "real college experience?" (Give choices)
- 1) always
  - 2) almost always
  - 3) sometimes
  - 4) hardly ever
  - 5) never

The following are some observations made during the remote listening sessions:

“There were three people calling during this session (Sunday, April 2<sup>nd</sup> from 7pm-9pm). They called lots of different phone numbers and more than ½ were no answers or answering machines. Only one individual refused to participate in the survey process.”

Caller #1: This individual is male. He spoke quickly while slurring his words. Many of his interviewee’s had to have him repeat questions two or three times to understand what he was asking them. He was very difficult for me to understand even though I helped write the survey questions and also had a script in front of me. He stressed and accented specific words within certain questions. This was especially noticeable and consistent when he asked, “How often do you feel like you are having a real college experience?” He would accent the last three words and laugh after asking the question.

Caller #2: This individual is female. She was very clear, concise, and easy to understand. She followed the script well – only asking the questions that she was supposed to. She didn’t sound like she was reading the questions.

Caller #3: This individual is male. When he would call a subject he would ask for the individual desired. When that individual came on the line he would pause for at least five seconds before saying anything to them. Some subjects said “Hello?” to get him to start talking again. Once past this point of identifying the subject he followed the script well. At times he was a little hard to understand.

“There were three people calling during this session (Monday, April 3<sup>rd</sup> from 7:30pm-9pm). They called many different numbers and successfully completed numerous surveys. Almost all the individuals that were called were home to answer the survey. No one refused to answer during this session.”

Caller #1: This individual is female. She followed the script well and spoke in a manner that was clear so she was easily understood. She was also very polite in her interactions with the people she called.

Caller #2: This individual was male. I realized he was the same person I had listened to the first session (Caller #1). I continued to listen to him anyway. I noticed he would give answer choices to the interviewee when they would seem confused about a question or couldn’t think of an answer instead of letting the interviewee think about their possible answer or just skipping the question. Also, I noticed he would get the individual on the phone and ask them if they were over eighteen years of age. That wasn’t part of the survey.

Caller #3: This individual was female. When asking the interviewee the questions from the survey she sounded as though she was reading. This didn’t seem to have a necessarily negative effect. She had a monotone type voice throughout the survey. This technique did have her following the script pretty well most of the time.

