Spring 2021 First Term Survey

Qualitative Analysis Report

May 25, 2021

Overall Summary

Prepared by: DASA Assessment

Background

The First Term Survey is part of the Division of Academic and Student Affairs' efforts to evaluate and improve the services provided to new NC State students. The survey helps us to gain an understanding of students' transition to NC State (both academically and personally), including how they are engaging with the university and their experiences with welcome programming. The survey contains a series of open-ended qualitative questions that help us better understand student thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

DASA Assessment reviewed the qualitative data and used coding techniques to organize the major themes of each qualitative question. After all data were coded, codes were reviewed and consolidated into larger themes. This report provides a summary of the major themes by question for first-year student respondents of the spring 2021 First Term Survey. Below are a few highlights about this project.

Population and Respondent Information

The spring 2021 First Term Survey was sent to all 354 new first-year students and 29.7% (N=105) completed the survey. For transfer students, all 330 were invited to complete the survey and 148 responded (44.8% response rate). Students had the option to skip qualitative questions. As such, not every student responded to every question.

Analysis

The qualitative data were first exported from Qualtrics and organized into a Microsoft Office spreadsheet. From there, the data were then de-identified and uploaded to Google Sheets. Using an inductive approach, DASA Assessment staff and a student worker read through all the responses and assigned them a general code (i.e. theme) if applicable. After all the data had been read and coded, DASA Assessment staff conducted a final review. At that point, codes were grouped into larger categories for reporting.

Important Limitations

- Nonresponse bias – The students who chose to respond to the qualitative questions may differ from the students who chose not to respond to the qualitative questions.

- Data reduction – The goal of this analysis was to reduce a large amount of data into smaller, more digestible, and subsequently more actionable data points. In reducing the data, you lose some of the student voice (e.g,. verbatim quotations).

- Interpretation – In qualitative research methods, researchers are instruments. As such, different qualitative researchers may organize codes and themes in slightly different ways.

Virtual Engagement and Social Connections

Sources of Social Connection

Students who indicated that they had connected with others received the follow-up question, "You noted that you have connected with other students during your time thus far at NC State. What is the primary way you have connected with other students?" Quantitative results are available for this question, but for the purposes of this report the write-in "Other" option was analyzed. 16 first-year and 11 transfer students wrote-in their response to this question. The only common write-in response that was not part of the provided choices was social media (e.g., Discord, Instagram).

Qualities of Positive Virtual Experiences

Students were asked, "Think about a virtual experience at NC State this semester that made you feel connected or engaged. What was it about that experience that made you feel connected or engaged?" 43 first-year students and 53 transfer students responded to this question. Some themes emerged and selected representative quotes are provided:

- Chance to meet new people (especially those with common experiences or interests)

  o "Engaging in conversation with other new students during Orientation made me feel more relieved and less stressed about my transfer decision."

  o "I have been attending meetings with [Student Organization] over zoom and it has allowed me to discuss a topic that I care about in greater detail with other like-minded individuals."

- Support and interaction from a professor, advisor, or mentor

  o "Weekly check ins with professors. Professors talking about other things outside of school to get a connection with him/her."

  o "People and staff wanting to interact with you and be engaged has helped me feel connected and welcomed to the Pack."

What Students "Want NC State to Know" About Virtual Experiences

Students were asked, "What do you want NC State to know about your experience with virtual services and programs outside of class?" 42 first-year students and 53 transfer students responded to this question, and responses included a mix of curricular and co-curricular experiences. The question was intentionally open-ended in order to capture any important information that the other questions on the survey might have been missed about students' experiences connecting virtually during the unique 2020-

2021 year. As a result, responses to the question were wide-ranging and each type of response was expressed by only a small number of student respondents.

These were some of the more common responses among the variety provided:

- Unspecified positive experiences with virtual environments (e.g., "It's been great so far.")
- Preference for in-person experiences
- Difficulty with accessing NC State resources, information, or technologies
- Difficulty connecting with others and finding a sense of community

Struggles and Support Needs

Self-Identified Struggles

Students were asked, "What have been your biggest struggles at NC State so far?" 55 first-year students and 89 transfer students responded to this question. Many of the responses pertained to students' academic struggles in their online classes and connecting socially.

- **Social Connection –** Common struggles included making friends, connecting with other students, and loneliness.

  - "Connecting with peers and faculty. Everything just feels so disconnected and I haven't found anything that allows people to just make more friendships. Most times I would make friends by sitting next to them in class, but you can't really do that anymore because all my classes are online."

  - "My biggest struggle has been not being on campus and getting to experience life at state and meeting new people. I am a very social person and need to be around people and not meeting anyone has been extremely hard on me."

- **Academics –** Common struggles included navigating the online learning format, time management, managing the workload, and using academic technologies.

  - "I have struggled with managing my time and my classes. I have found myself overwhelmed at times and stressed because it feels like I won't be able to get it all done in time."

  - "Course workload is a lot. I have had to skip lectures in some classes to finish work for other classes, and I work on schoolwork 6 days a week. Multiple instructors did not respect Wellness Days when making assignments due and there was no spring break, so [I was] starting to feel very burned out academically."

- o "Online classes are really hard, especially transferring in, it was very hard to know if I was completing everything I needed to be. It's just way harder to learn as well."

Students were also asked, "What is the primary source of stress for you this semester?" and "In which of these areas has your stress increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? (Select all that apply)" with several identical response options between the two questions (details about student responses are in the First Term Survey quantitative report). There were very few responses and there were no emerging themes that were different from the "select all that apply" response options already provided in the question.

Support Needed from NC State

Students were asked, "What support do you think you need from NC State faculty and staff to be successful during your first year?" 50 first-year students and 74 transfer students responded to this question.

- **Flexibility, empathy, and support**

  - o "I think I need my professors to be understanding when students miss assignments due to other work needing to be done."

  - o "I needed some of the staff to be more conscientious of how draining back-to-back Zoom calls can be, and how hard it can be to remain engaged on my computer all day."

  - o "…To be considerate until we are as close to back to normal as possible. Learning in an online environment from our homes have been difficult for many students."

- **Advising support**

  - o "I think I would like some support from my academic advisor/counselor every once and a while but especially when a semester is coming to an end and registration is starting."

  - o "I would like to communicate with my advisors more often to speak on academic work, future classes, and graduate school."

For More Information

The summary provided in this report, as with any summary of qualitative data, does not fully capture the comments of every survey respondent. To discuss how you can learn more from this qualitative data set, please reach out to Jordan Luzader (jdluzade@ncsu.edu) in DASA Assessment. You can also request access to the responses of a particular student population by submitting a data request.