

Fall 2020 First Term Survey

Qualitative Analysis Report

November 18, 2020

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 fall 2020 First Term Survey. Below are a few highlights about this project.

Population and Respondent Information

The fall 2020 First Term Survey was sent to all 4,666 new first-year students and 29% (N=1,367) completed the survey. For transfer students, 1,446 were invited to complete the survey and 427 responded (29.5% 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, the assessment intern, and a student worker read through all of 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

Sources of Virtual Connection and Engagement

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?” 531 first-year students and 137 transfer students responded to this question with a variety of responses. Students talked about the qualities of the interactions and the event formats in which those interactions took place that made them feel connected or engaged. There were no major themes that were expressed by a high percentage of students, and the most common response (15% who answered) was that they did *not* experience connection/engagement virtually. However, the top five most mentioned response themes are shared below, with selected representative quotes.

- **Meeting new people** – Some students who answered the question talked about the opportunity to meet new people as the reason they felt connected/engaged in a virtual experience.
 - “I was talking and collaborating with classmates and was able to learn more about each other, which is really valuable to me. It allowed me to step out of my shell and be more comfortable meeting new people.”
 - “I loved getting involved in Student Government this year. It has helped me talk to many students in different colleges and ages that I never would have interacted with otherwise and to address issues within NC State and help make them better.”
- **Having interaction (general)** – Some students who answered the question talked about how the opportunity just to interact with people virtually contributed to feeling engaged/connected.
 - “Being able to talk to another person and see their face has been the biggest thing for feeling connected.”
 - “A club meeting - it was nice seeing other people like me and hanging out casually.”
- **Common interests/experiences with others** – Some students who answered the question mentioned that it helped to interact with students who had things in common with them within virtual settings.
 - “I am attending a First Year Connection Program with other students that are in my major. This helps with forming study groups and simply connecting with other people.”
 - “I loved my arts village forum where I met people and got to discuss a passion of mine. I got connected to those in my dorm and met a lot of people that way.”

- **Engaging or interactive event format** – Some students who answered this question reported that virtual experiences that had interactive components built-in (as opposed to passively listening/watching) contributed to feeling connected and engaged.
 - “It was interactive, i.e. we voted on something or took a poll.”
 - “When I did the stress management [program] the [presenter] was very nice and tried to get us involved in the conversation rather than her just taking at us.”
- **Small groups** – Some students who answered the question reported that the opportunity to break into small groups or breakout rooms helped them feel a sense of connection and engagement during virtual events.
 - “One of the times I felt most connected virtually was attending my small group orientation zoom because I got to learn more about some of the people that I would see in class.”
 - “Talking in small groups is easier than large groups.”

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?” 523 first-year students and 145 transfer students responded to this question. 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 fall 2020 semester. As a result, responses to the question were wide-ranging and each type of response was expressed by only a small percentage of student respondents.

There were no major themes that were expressed by a high percentage of students. However, the top five most mentioned response themes are shared below. It should be noted that despite the question specifically asking about outside-of-class experiences, analysts noticed that many student responses seemed to be drawing from their virtual experiences in-class, outside of class, or a mix of both.

- **Preference for in-person** – Some students who responded to this question expressed a desire for in-person classes and/or engagement activities, consistent with other qualitative findings in this report.
 - “If things were normal, I think I would love to get engaged and go to events and try new stuff. But with things as they are, I have almost no interest in virtual events, mainly because I'm already computer-fatigued after spending the entire day doing work online.”
 - “I don't like them [virtual classes] nearly as much as in-person classes. I don't learn as well and have to teach myself a lot more than I would.”

- **Difficulty accessing campus resources or information** – Some students who responded to this question indicated they did not know where to find information about engagement activities, or they suggested that such opportunities should be advertised more.
 - “I think resources need to be simplified because it can get confusing knowing which website has which information.”
 - “I have had little to no experience with virtual programs and services because I'm not sure how to even access most of them.”
- **Unspecified positive experiences** – Some students who answered this question reported that their virtual experiences were satisfactory or gave short positive answers such as “It's going well.”
 - “They have been a great substitute for events and activities we haven't been able to do during COVID-19.”
 - “It is great and I hope to get more involved. I know it's just the beginning.”
- **Social isolation** – Some students who answered this question mentioned difficulty making connections or social isolation during the virtual semester, consistent with other qualitative findings in this report.
 - “Because everything is virtual, it makes it very tough to connect with other students and make new friends.”
 - “I think that academically, I am aware of all the resources available to me. These resources have been repeatedly told to me. However, virtual programs have done practically nothing for me socially.”
 - “The virtual platform does not create a sense of community. It only feels as if I am going through the motions so that I am not left behind for our eventual return to campus.”
- **Appreciate NC State's efforts** – Some students who answered this question expressed appreciation for NC State's efforts to keep students engaged during the virtual semester. Among the students who made this kind of comment, some accompanied it with positive statements about their virtual engagement experiences, while others made comments such as “it's not the same” as in-person despite acknowledging NC State's efforts.
 - “I think you have done a really good job with all of your virtual offerings and programs. However, it just will never be the same as in-person.”
 - “The faculty and staff are doing an excellent job managing this school year, even under these unusual circumstances.”

Making Social Connections

Students were asked, “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. 116 first-year and 58 transfer students wrote-in their response to this question. The most common responses for the write-in option are as follows:

- **Social media** – Some students wrote-in that their primary way of making connections with other students was through social media. A notable number mentioned the Discord app.
- **Through other friends** – Students mentioned making social connections through people they already knew from high school, roommates, etc. who introduced them to others.
- **Public campus spaces** – Some students said that spending time in public spaces, including Talley Student Union and playing outdoor games, was the primary way they had made connections with other students this semester.

Struggles and Support Needs

Self-Identified Struggles

Students were asked, “What have been your biggest struggles at NC State so far?” 1,112 first-year students and 351 transfer students responded to this question. Many of the responses pertained to students’ academic struggles in their online classes and connecting socially.

- **Managing workload and navigating the online learning format** – 43% of first-year students who answered this question stated having some form of academic struggles. These included managing the workload of specific classes and navigating the online learning environment. Students also expressed difficulties with staying motivated and focused on academic work. Similarly, 50% of transfer students who answered this question expressed their greatest struggles to be in academics. The following are sample quotes from first-year and transfer students:
 - “I have felt woefully underprepared to deal with a fully online course load. I feel like I am being overtaken by work and constant stress. I am struggling with material I already found very challenging in a format (online) that is extremely difficult for me because it feels very monotonous.”
 - “Keeping track of all my classes online, and making sure I didn't forget something or miss something important.”

- “So far, online learning is my biggest stressor. I did not realize how much I enjoyed going to school before it was taken away. I thought I was mentally motivated enough for online classes but I was very wrong.”
- **Connecting with others** – 33% of first-year students who answered this question mentioned struggling to make friends and connect with faculty and staff. Beyond friendship, some students expressed difficulty in finding an overall sense of community. Transfer students also reported difficulty with engaging socially. 23% of transfers who answered this question mentioned that connecting with others and finding a sense of community has been challenging. The following are selected quotes from first-year and transfer students:
 - “My biggest struggles have revolved around not feeling like I'm in college. When I think about it, I realize that I really have no friends or strong connections that I made to the school. As a result, I have no emotional connection to the school itself.”
 - “Making connections! It is so hard to made friends, get involved, and network during this time given our already intensified course load.”
 - “Meeting new people and making friends has been almost impossible with Covid going on. I set out on my journey to NC State not only to pursue my degree choice but to also meet a lot of new people and make new friends here.”

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). Upon analysis of the write-in “other” option for these questions, only one new theme emerged. This theme was that some students indicated having to move off campus was a source of stress for them in fall 2020.

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?” 790 first-year students and 241 transfer students responded to this question. Answers to this question revolved around the need for more academic and advising support and general support from NC State faculty and staff.

There were no major themes that were expressed by a high percentage of students in either academic support or general support. However, the top three most mentioned response themes for each are shared below. These top themes were the same for first-year and transfer students:

- **Academic and Advising Support**
 - **Advising** – Students reported that they would benefit from general academic advising for support in choosing/switching majors, planning for the future, and other academic needs.
 - “I would like to talk more to my academic advisor. I didn’t realize how many questions I had until after our first meeting”
 - “Academic counseling is a big help especially when it comes to the course load planning aspect.”
 - **Faculty Flexibility** – Students indicated that flexibility from faculty on implementation and requirements on exams and assignments would be beneficial to their learning at this time.
 - “I would like staff to understand that no one is perfect and we all make mistakes. If I don't complete an assignment on time or correctly, it is often due to me not knowing that something is due or lack of communication, rather than me just not wanting to do it and procrastinating. Allowing for mistakes to be made and giving students a little ‘wiggle room’ is helpful in decreasing stress when a mistake is made.”
 - “Leniency. A lot of students are going through it during these Covid times, myself included. So I hope teachers will be lenient with us in regards to our academics.”
 - **In-Person Classes** – Some students expressed that they would learn better in-person.
 - “More opportunities to meet face to face, and more instructional support. I don't do well with Zoom lectures or reading from the textbook and interpreting it myself.”
- **General Support**
 - **Help Getting Socially Connected** – Students indicated the desire for more events and activities that would help them connect with other students.
 - “I need help in finding a community and opportunities that fit my interests.”
 - “Have more opportunities for new students to connect that aren't Zoom.”
 - “Rebuilding a sense of connection and college experience of feeling like NC State is more than just virtual learning.”
 - **Resources** – Some students expressed the need for greater access to campus resources such as tutoring and counseling.
 - “Career support and academic support to really make sure I know what I'm doing when it comes to achieving my goals.”

- “More opportunities to meet with the faculty and staff.”
- “I would need tutoring and help with things that I do not understand, as well as speaking with an advisor.”
- **Understanding and Empathy** – Students reported that it would be helpful to know that faculty and staff have a clear understanding of how students are feeling and what they are experiencing. The students expressed a desire for general support, guidance and empathy during this time.
 - “Compassion and understanding would go a long way. This is a trying time for everyone, and students understand that and just want the same common courtesy that professors are requesting of us.”
 - “I could use more understanding from some of my professors. I understand why they are difficult, but taking classes during a pandemic is incredibly stressful, especially as a freshman.”
 - “I think I just need the constant support and understanding from my professors that right now is a difficult time and new to everyone.”

Transfer Admissions

Transfer students were asked “What else, if anything, would you like us to know about your admissions experience as a transfer student at NC State?” 163 students answered this question, and responses were mostly positive. The most common responses were that they had a smooth admissions process (15% who answered the question) and that staff and advisors were helpful in the process (17%). Selected quotes are provided below:

- “Everyone that I have dealt with at NC State has been very informative and helpful. Even if I speak with a staff member that cannot personally help me, they always guide me to the correct person.”
- “Found the process very straight forward, NC States website was easy to navigate and helpful.”

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 (jduluzade@ncsu.edu) in DASA Assessment. You can also request access to the responses of a particular student population by submitting a [data request](#).