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# Canadian University Presidents' Perceptions of Campus Life Issues

## Abstract

*This paper reports the findings of a survey in which Canadian university presidents were asked to indicate the prevalence of 20 selected campus life issues at their institutions. The presidents were also asked to indicate the extent to which these same 20 campus life issues increased or decreased over the previous five years. Seventy-five per cent of all Canadian university presidents responded to this survey. When the mean responses to each of the questions were ranked in descending order, student preoccupation with future career, lack of student interest in broader, intellectual issues, student apathy, and alcohol abuse topped the list of campus life issues perceived to be most prevalent at the present time. Antipathy towards women activists and theft were also deemed to be quite prevalent, though not as much as the first four issues mentioned. Except for alcohol abuse, the presidents believed that all these issues increased in prevalence over the previous five-year period.*

## Résumé

*Le présent article fait état des résultats d'un sondage dans le cadre duquel on a demandé aux recteurs d'universités canadiennes d'indiquer la prévalence de 20 problèmes donnés de la vie universitaire dans leur établissement. On leur a également demandé d'indiquer dans quelle mesure ces 20 problèmes de la vie universitaire s'étaient aggravés ou au contraire atténués par rapport aux cinq années précédentes. Soixante-quinze pour cent de tous les recteurs des universités canadiennes ont participé à ce sondage. Lorsque les réponses moyennes à chacune des questions sont classées par ordre décroissant, on constate que les*

*problèmes de la vie universitaire qui prédominent à l'heure actuelle sont la préoccupation des étudiants face aux débouchés de carrière, le manque d'intérêt de étudiants pour les questions intellectuelles plus vastes, l'apathie des étudiants et l'abus de boissons alcoolisées. L'antipathie à l'égard des femmes activistes et du vol est également perçu comme un problème courant, mais pas autant que les quatre premiers mentionnés. En dehors de l'abus de boissons alcoolisées, les recteurs estiment que ces problèmes ont pris de l'ampleur par rapport à la période quinquennale précédente.*

Little comprehensive research has been conducted on social conditions on Canadian university campuses. A thorough understanding of social conditions is important, as they exert a great impact on the quality of education. An education extends beyond what a student is "taught" in the classroom. The attitudes and behaviours that a student develops in response to the social environment outside of the classroom are as much a part of the learning experience as taking lectures notes or writing examinations. It is impossible to improve the quality of campus life by addressing only academic issues. This sentiment is expressed in the mission statement of the University of Guelph:

Students in university do not simply take courses or enrol in academic programs. Much of their life is spent outside the classroom, laboratory or study. It is important then that this part of their experience be enriched and that it contribute to their educational development. (p. 11)

### **Background**

Despite the importance of the topic and the publicity it has received, there has been little formal study of social conditions on Canadian campuses. Most of the research, which has been done in Canada, focuses on two specific areas - substance abuse and gender issues.

A study of 5,000 university students at four Ontario universities (Gliksman, Eng, & Smythe, 1989) revealed that a disturbing number of students are alcohol abusers. Thirty per cent consume 15 or more drinks each week. Very few students, on the other hand, have tried illicit drugs such as cocaine or LSD (p. 21).

While alcohol use has always been a part of university life, the alcohol-induced death of a young man at the University of Guelph raised awareness of the consequences of alcohol abuse. A young man choked on his own vomit and died after a night of heavy drinking. His death

prompted an inquest into the link between alcohol abuse and university life (*Globe and Mail*, Sept. 19, 1989).

The issue of sexual harassment on campus has garnered considerable attention in the mainstream media. The publicity has come about mainly as a result of blatant incidents, such as a professor leering at a female swimmer at a University of Toronto pool (*Globe and Mail*, March 28, 1989), male students mocking an anti-date rape campaign at Queen's University (*Toronto Star*, November 2, 1989), or the discovery of sexist graffiti on the wall of Osgoode Hall (*Toronto Star*, April 21, 1990).

Sexual discrimination is not always as blatant as sexual harassment but it is nevertheless pervasive on Canadian university campuses, according to a study conducted by Dagg and Thompson (1988). It is exhibited in such things as the failure of female academics to achieve promotion and tenure.

A study of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse of women in Canadian university dating relationships (DeKeseredy, 1988) concluded that, "women abuse is a serious social problem in southern Ontario universities as well as in various U.S. institutions of higher learning" (p. 71). The majority of the respondents in this survey admitted to having psychologically abused their female dating partners. Very few (only 2.6% of the entire sample) admitted to sexually abusing their dating partner (p. 54). The author did feel, however, that his study underestimated the true extent of women abuse in Ontario universities.

Sexual harassment is not the only kind of harassment present on Canadian campuses. Newspaper reports reveal the presence of harassment based on race and sexual orientation (*Globe and Mail*, February 8, 1990, p. A12; *Vancouver Sun*, April 4, 1990, p. B2). Interest in these issues is not just confined to the media. At the national conference of the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, held in June 1990, workshops were devoted to the issues of racism, sexism and homophobia, and sexual assault.

In his 1990 report, *Campus Life: In Search of Community*, Ernest Boyer attributes much of the prejudice and intolerance on campus to the increasing diversity of both student backgrounds and lifestyles. Although the study is based on data from American universities, the findings are germane for Canadian universities, which too are experiencing an increase in the diversity of their student population (Statistics Canada, Cat. 81-209). "Many campuses," Boyer argues, "have not been successful at building larger loyalties within a diverse student body and there is

disturbing evidence that deeply ingrained prejudices persist” (p.4). Some of this prejudice finds expression in offensive language or other acts of incivility.

Boyer’s study is based on extensive on-site interviews with American university presidents and a national survey of American college and university presidents conducted by the American Council on Education in 1989. Lack of student participation in campus events was the most extensive problem reported by the presidents (76% said that lack of student involvement is a moderate to major problem). “Students are spending little time pursuing intellectual interests beyond the classroom,” said Boyer, “The goal of many is getting a credential. . .” (p.3).

According to a report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, professors at many U.S. institutions acknowledge that students have been concerned about grades and the job market for years. The anxiety over getting good grades, however, has lately intensified to an uncomfortable degree. The article suggests this anxiety is caused by pressure from parents who are spending a lot of money to send their children to college and therefore expect them to excel academically. Students are reluctant to take risks and broaden their horizons, by working for student government or joining student-run clubs, for fear that these activities will cut into their study time (January 31, 1990, p. A33, A34).

As a first attempt to gain a more comprehensive picture of campus life in this country, the authors surveyed Canadian university presidents and asked them to 1) comment upon the prevalence of a selected group of social issues; 2) indicate the success of their institution in achieving a caring and inclusive community for faculty and students; and 3) list the kinds of student services they provide and student nonacademic disciplinary measures they follow.

This study is based on the perceptions of university presidents. Whether these impressions are deemed to be an accurate representation of the situation on campus is, for the authors, an open question. But, as these presidents are situated at the crossroads of all campus concerns, eliciting their views would seem a valuable first step in assessing campus climates and the quality of campus life.

## Method

The presidents of 66 Canadian institutions responded to the survey which, on the basis of a population of 88 universities, represents a response rate of 75 per cent. The survey itself was divided into four

sections. This paper reports primarily on the first two sections as well as one question in the fourth section of the survey.

The first section was designed to assess the prevalence of a selected group of 20 attitudes and behaviours – which will hereafter be referred to as campus life issues. These issues were chosen by the authors based on a review of academic studies of campus life at North American universities, reports that appeared in the academic and mainstream press, discussions with colleagues at their own and other institutions about “hot button” issues, proceedings of annual conferences of student affairs professionals,<sup>2</sup> and finally their own experience dealing with social problems on campus.

**Table 1**  
*Campus life issues at 66 Canadian universities*

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1. Alcohol abuse	11. Racial Harassment
2. Antipathy towards women activists	12. Religious bigotry
3. Closed-mindedness	13. Sexual harassment
4. Date rape	14. Student apathy
5. Drug abuse	15. Student preoccupation with future career
6. Harassment of homosexuals	16. Student protests
7. Incivility	17. Theft
8. Lack of student interest in broader, intellectual issues	18. Town-grown relationships
9. Language group bigotry	19. Vandalism
10. Offensive language	20. Violence

The respondents were asked to assign a ranking of 1 through 7 to each of the above-identified campus life issues: 1 indicating that it is not at all prevalent and 7 indicating it is extremely prevalent at the respondent's institution.

The second set of 20 questions in the survey asked the presidents whether they thought the above-mentioned issues increased or decreased in prevalence over the previous five years. Again, respondents gave each of the campus life items a score of between 1 and 7, 1 indicating the issue declined markedly, 4 indicating it remained relatively constant, and 7 indicating it increased dramatically.

The third section of the survey was designed to get some sense of the campus as a community: Do faculty and students have a sense of belonging? Do they interact outside of the classroom? Do students receive sufficient guidance and an introduction to university life? Respondents were asked to give nine statements a score of 1 to 5, 1

indicating that they disagreed strongly, 3 indicating they had no opinion, and 5 indicating they agreed strongly.

The fourth section was comprised mainly of closed-end questions in which the presidents were asked to indicate the number and kind of student support and orientation services available at their institutions. Presidents were also asked to describe student nonacademic discipline policies and procedures. Finally, an open-ended question asked presidents to list three "problem areas" among their students that were likely to cause the most difficulty in the next two or three years.

While the campus life issues in the first two sections of the survey are admittedly wide ranging, they share one common characteristic in that they all impact to some degree on the quality of student life. Some of these issues can be defined and quantified relatively easily; theft for example could be the number of robberies reported on campus in a given period. Other issues defy strict definition. Rather than ignore the issues that are more difficult to define and measure or impose a definition, the authors allowed presidents to use their own judgement in determining the nature and extent of the 20 attitudes and behaviours, the assumption being that presidents should have the knowledge and experience necessary to make such judgements. Minor differences in the interpretation of some of the issues was expected but the authors did not feel the differences would be so great as to make comparisons misleading. The analysis was mainly descriptive in nature. Frequencies were calculated for all applicable data. The mean and standard deviation were derived from these frequencies. Cross-tabulations were run on the responses to each of the first forty questions and a list of 13 university characteristics (size, location, type, degrees offered, program range, region, student/faculty ratio, age of institution, source of students, operating income, affiliation, gender mix, and research intensity), but no statistically significant relationships were found, owing in part to the small cell sizes.

## Results

### *Campus life issues: Current prevalence*

A rank ordering of the presidents' mean responses to the question: "Indicate the extent to which the following attitudes or behaviours are prevalent at your institution?" revealed that student preoccupation with future career is perceived to be most prevalent on campus. This is followed by low interest in broad, intellectual issues and student apathy.

Nearly 50% of the presidents believe that student preoccupation with future career is strongly characteristic of their institutions. Only 7.5% feel this issue is not at all prevalent, the lowest such response for the entire battery of 20 questions.

*Table 2*

*Presidents' perceived prevalence of 20 campus life issues:  
Mean responses ranked in descending order*

	Mean Response
1. Student preoccupation with future career	5.11
2. Low interest in broad intellectual issues	4.32
3. Student apathy	4.05
4. Alcohol abuse	3.91
5. Antipathy towards women activists	3.42
6. Theft	3.38
7. Closed-mindedness	3.34
8. Sexual Harassment	3.17
9. Vandalism	3.09
10. Offensive language	3.03
11. Incivility	2.89
12. Town/gown relations	2.67
13. Harassment of homosexuals	2.56
14. Racial harassment	2.44
15. Language Group Bigotry	2.38
16. Drug abuse	2.36
17. Date rape	2.27
18. Student protests	2.24
19. Violence	2.18
20. Religious bigotry	2.05

The second most prevalent issue, according to the presidents surveyed, is the lack of interest in broader, intellectual issues. Nearly all of the presidents (91%) believe this issue is at least moderately prevalent. Just under one-fifth have the impression that it is extremely characteristic of their institutions.

The third highest-ranked item, in terms of the mean response, is student apathy. Like the previous issue, nearly one-fifth (18.2%) of the presidents feel that student apathy is extremely characteristic of their schools. The slightly lower mean response (and therefore lower rank) accorded this issue stems from the fact that over 15% of the presidents feel student apathy is not at all prevalent. This compares to only 9% of the respondents for lack of student interest in broader, intellectual issues.

The fourth highest-ranked campus life issue and the highest-ranked issue of a "non-academic" type is alcohol abuse. Although ranked just below student apathy, the mean response (3.91) indicates it is perceived to be somewhat less prevalent than the three aforementioned issues. Ten per cent of the presidents feel that alcohol abuse is extremely characteristic of their campuses, while 16.6% feel that it is not at all prevalent.

Antipathy against women activists, while not identified by any of the respondents as extremely prevalent, ranks fifth in terms of its relative prevalence on campus. More than half of all the respondents (52.3%) believe this antipathy is at least moderately prevalent.

Theft is perceived to be the sixth most prevalent campus life issue, even though 29.2% of all responding presidents feel it is not at all prevalent on their campuses. Most respondents (66.2%) feel this behaviour is at least moderately prevalent but few (4.6%) feel it is extremely characteristic of their universities.

Closed-mindedness amongst the student population ranks seventh followed by sexual harassment in eighth place. While none of the presidents surveyed feel that sexual harassment is extremely prevalent, roughly 43% feel it is present to at least some degree.

The mean scores indicate that vandalism, offensive language, and incivility are not perceived to be extremely prevalent. They are nevertheless more frequently observed than the harassment of individuals on the basis of their race, sexual orientation, or mother-tongue.

While alcohol abuse stands fourth among all of the campus life issues identified, the presidents feel that drug abuse is much less common. The mean response (2.36) ranks it only 16th. Most of the presidents agree on the low incidence of this behaviour, as indicated by the low standard deviation in the responses to this question.

According to the Canadian university presidents surveyed, "date rape" is not perceived to be a highly prevalent campus life issue. Date rape ranks only 17th out of all the campus life issues identified in this survey. Only 15% of the respondents feel that "date rape" is at least moderately prevalent. Perhaps what is most interesting about this particular issue is the response pattern. Six per cent of the respondents did not assign a value to this issue - the highest missing number for any of the questions on the survey.

Student protests and on-campus violence are not frequent occurrences, according to the respondents in this survey. These issues rank 18th and 19th respectively in terms of their prevalence on campus. Of the 20 campus life issues identified, religious bigotry is by far the least prevalent.

### *Campus life issues: Perceived changes*

In the second set of 20 questions in this study, respondents identified the extent to which the attitudes and behaviours identified in the first set of 20 questions, increased or decreased over the previous five



years. Not only are student preoccupation with future career and lack of student interest in broader, intellectual issues most prevalent on Canadian campuses at the present time, they are also the two issues which, presidents believe, increased to the greatest degree over the last five years. Nearly three-quarters of all the respondents feel the increase in student preoccupation with future career was dramatic. Less than 2% feel the issue decreased in prevalence.

In the first set of questions, theft was identified as the sixth most prevalent issue currently on Canadian campuses. When ranked according to its increasing prevalence over the last five years, theft moves up three places to third place. Over one-third of the respondents (36.4%) feel theft increased significantly over the last five years.

University presidents feel two other campus life issues increased over the last five years – antipathy towards women activists and student apathy. Antipathy towards women activists ranks fourth in terms of its increased incidence on campus. Forty per cent of the respondents feel this increase in antipathy was significant.

Student apathy ranks fifth in terms of its increased incidence on campus. Nearly one-third of the respondents (30.3%) feel student apathy increased over the last five years.

While university presidents believe that five potentially-troublesome issues increased in prevalence over the last five years, they also perceive that over the same period, 15 other issues declined. Drug abuse experienced the biggest drop. More than 60% of the university presidents feel drug abuse declined over the last five years. Only 3% feel it increased. Alcohol abuse is also on the wane, according to these university presidents. Over 40% feel the abuse of this substance declined. The marked decline in the prevalence of another campus life issue - student protests – paralleled the increase in student apathy. While nearly one-third of the presidents feel that student apathy increased, more than 40% feel the level of student protest declined over the previous five years.

### ***Problem areas likely to cause the most difficulty***

In an open-ended question in section four of the survey, presidents were asked to consider problem areas that might originate among students at their institution over the next two or three years and indicate the three problems that were most likely to cause difficulty. Thirty-five per cent of the presidents said that financial concerns, for example, concern over increasing tuition costs and shrinking financial aid, would be most likely to cause them difficulty in the next two or three years. The second most often mentioned problems were alcohol abuse and gender issues. Each were mentioned by 27% of the presidents. The third most often

mentioned problem area was inadequate facilities. Twenty-one per cent of the presidents said that inadequate facilities (and inadequate funds to remedy the problem) were most likely to cause them difficulty in the short run. Lack of student involvement and interest in activities outside of the classroom was the fourth most often mentioned problem area. Twenty per cent of the presidents felt this issue was likely to cause the most difficulty.

### Discussion

This survey of Canadian university presidents reveals that of the 20 campus life issues identified, student preoccupation with future career, low interest in broad intellectual issues, and student apathy are perceived to be most prevalent.

The authors did not interview any of the presidents to seek explanations for the prevalence of these particular issues. Axelrod's (1990) examination of Canadian student life suggests that "the chronically unstable economy. . . has led to an intensity in the classroom, a preoccupation with grades, a greater desire to consume rather than question knowledge and a more evident concern with the educational pay off rather than the educational process" (p. 24). Horowitz (1989) suggests that the growing disinclination of students to broaden their intellectual horizons or participate in campus life is a reflection of the dominance of particular student subcultures – the "new outsiders", who originally came to the fore in the 1970s, and the "old outsiders" who are at present the fastest-growing group. Horowitz says outsiders began as traditionally-excluded groups (women, Jews, visible minorities) who viewed a university education as a way of overcoming their disadvantaged social position. The "new outsiders" are generally middle-class students who, concerned that increased competition might prevent them from achieving the material prosperity of their parents, focus on grades in order to get into professional schools. This leaves them little time for political protests or campus hi-jinks. The "old outsiders" are nontraditional students – mature and part-time students who have work and family commitments in addition to their studies and simply do not have the time to participate in campus life to the extent of "traditional" students.

While not as prevalent as the aforementioned issues, alcohol abuse is, nevertheless, a fact of Canadian university life. In terms of the mean response this issue ranks fourth. It is a troubling testament to the enormity of the problem that despite a perceived dramatic decline in alcohol abuse over the last five years, it is still one of the most prevalent issues on Canadian campuses.

While there certainly is an impression among the presidents that students over-indulge in alcohol, the same cannot be said of drugs. Most presidents feel that instances of drug abuse are extremely rare. The presidents also feel that "date rape", student activism, violence, and religious bigotry are among the least prevalent issues on campus. The perceived low incidence of "date rape" may simply be a reflection of the fact that date rape is difficult to identify and is frequently not reported. It is much easier, on the other hand, for presidents to gauge the level of student activism. It is hardly surprising that protest activity is down among students whose primary interest appears to be getting a degree and getting a job. The perceived decline may also be a reflection of the change in the style of student activism. While student protests have not disappeared altogether, gone are the days when student leaders could rally the entire student body to protest for social change. Student activists now represent narrower interests and are more likely to work within the university system in order to generate change.

Not only is the disinclination of students to broaden their intellectual horizons and to participate in campus life beyond the classroom most prevalent at the present time, but these two issues appear to be on the rise. Two other issues - theft and antipathy towards women activists - are also perceived to be increasing. Antipathy towards women activists ranks highly, both in terms of its current prevalence on campus and its perceived increase over the last five years. It is ironic that in terms of attitudes on campus, the backlash against those who identify and speak out against sexism and sexual harassment is perceived to be more prevalent than the problems themselves. This may reflect what Dagg and Thompson (1988) referred to, in their comprehensive examination of sexual harassment on Canadian university campuses, as "anti-women ambience".

While issues such as student preoccupation with future career, low interest in broad, intellectual issues, and student apathy are viewed by presidents to be the most prevalent, they are not the most problematic. It is the rising cost of an education and the students' ability to finance it that presidents believe will cause the most difficulty in the near term. While the lack of student involvement and interest in activities other than formal studies is not at the top of the presidents' list of problems, the fact that it is the fourth most often mentioned problem area does indicate that it is of concern to them.

Concern over alcohol abuse surpasses its prevalence on campus. It is the fourth most prevalent of the 20 issues identified, but the second most often mentioned problem area. The presidents feel that gender

issues are as likely as alcohol abuse to cause difficulty over the next two or three years. However, none of the gender issues are as prevalent as alcohol abuse. Antipathy towards women activists is the fifth most prevalent issue followed by sexual harassment in the eighth spot and date rape in the 17th spot.

The above comparison illustrates that prevalence is not always a factor in the perceived seriousness of an issue. The nature of the area of concern is itself an important consideration. How much interest or controversy surrounds a given issue on a given campus or in the larger society? How much time and resources are involved in dealing with these issues on a daily basis? How is the prevalence of these attitudes and behaviours measured? Data on these and other related questions need to be obtained before a clearer picture of the quality of Canadian campus life can be obtained.

Notwithstanding these limitations, a comparison of the results of this survey with the results of the 1989 survey of American college and university presidents (American Council on Education, 1989) reveals some interesting similarities and differences. In the U.S. survey, the presidents were asked, "What three campus life issues have given you the greatest concern?" Alcohol abuse was mentioned most frequently by the presidents (45%). Four other issues were mentioned by more than 10% of the presidents. These include: student apathy (30%), campus security and crime (25%), inadequate facilities (18%), and interracial/intercultural relations (13%).

A comparison of these results with the Canadian presidents' responses to the question, "What three problem areas are most likely to cause difficulty at your institution over the next two or three years?" reveals that financial concerns are ranked very low by the U.S. presidents (only 4% said this issue has given them great concern) but very high by the Canadian university presidents.

Given its high rank on the list of concerns of both Canadian and American university presidents, alcohol abuse is obviously a problem that transcends national boundaries. Concern over this issue is somewhat higher, however, among the U.S. presidents.

While both Canadian and American university presidents agree that alcohol abuse is a big problem, they differ dramatically on campus security and crime and gender issues. Not one Canadian president indicated that crime was likely to cause them difficulty over the next two or three years. One-quarter of the U.S. presidents on the other hand, said that this was an issue of great concern to them.

Concern about gender issues is very high on the Canadian presidents' list of concerns. The only gender-related issue mentioned by the U.S. presidents is sexual harassment and even then only 2% said it is an issue of great concern to them.

Canadian and American university presidents share a similar level of concern over inadequate facilities but lack of student involvement is viewed as more of a problem in the United States than Canada.

## NOTES

1. Depending on the institution, the CEO is variously called the president, principal, rector, or vice-chancellor. For the purposes of this paper, president will be used generically.
2. The proceedings of the national conference of the Canadian Association of University and College Student Services held from June 17th to June 20th, 1990, at the University of Toronto.

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