2005 RESEARCH REPORT

National Online Learners Priorities Report

- Online students' priorities for their learning experience
- Institutional strengths and challenges from the online learner perspective
- Review of the demographics of online learners
- Influences on the decision to enroll and sources of information
- Data from more than 16,500 students at 60 institutions

Noel-Levitz®

The 2005 National Online Learners Priorities Report
Introduction and Overview

The importance of student satisfaction assessment

Online learners are a growing population on campuses across the country. An increasing number of institutions are adding distance learning as an alternative to classroom-based programs. Students are seeking online options as a flexible way to meet their program requirements while balancing work and home commitments. Some institutions are operating in a cyber-only environment, offering no bricks-and-mortar classrooms.

Serving the needs of online learners in this environment becomes a greater priority for colleges and universities. Student satisfaction is considered a core element for higher education institutions serving traditional-age, on-campus students, and now more colleges and universities are expanding this assessment activity to online learners as well. As this group becomes a larger segment of the overall student population, it is important to include online learners in systematic assessment activities.

Satisfaction assessment enables institutions to strategically and tactically target areas most in need of immediate improvement. It facilitates the development of planning and intervention priorities specific to online learners, and it helps institutions examine student transactions with all major aspects of their experience, including academic, registration, and customer service.

College and university leaders must understand how satisfied online learners are with their educational experience—both "inside" and "outside" of the classroom setting—in order to best serve those students. By collecting satisfaction data from online learners on a regular basis, campuses are able to determine where they are best serving these students and where there are areas for improvement.

Satisfied students are more likely to be successful students. Research indicates that institutions with more satisfied students have higher graduation rates, lower loan default rates, and higher alumni giving. Satisfaction with an institution includes a combination of academic factors as well as areas related to campus services. An institution needs to identify all of the issues that are relevant to students. These include their interaction with faculty, as well as the service they receive from staff and administrators; the resources provided to students; policies that are in place; and students' overall feelings about the value of the experience.

Satisfaction assessment can be further refined by capturing students' level of importance (or expectation). Importance ratings provide institutions with valuable data on the areas that matter most to students. With this view, institutions can celebrate their strengths—those areas that have high satisfaction AND high importance. Institutions can also focus their improvement efforts on areas where satisfaction is low AND importance is high, and not be distracted by low satisfaction areas that may not matter to online learners.

The importance of fit

Campus leaders realize the importance of congruence or "fit" between what online learners expect from their educational experience and their satisfaction with what they perceive as the reality of that experience. Research indicates that the greater the fit between expectations and reality, the greater the likelihood for persistence, student success, and stability. The opposite effect also applies: with greater incongruence or lack of fit comes higher attrition, poor performance, and fluctuation.

Understanding this fit between what online learners expect and what they experience is a primary benefit of satisfaction assessment. Importance indicators add another layer of understanding. The level of importance students place on a particular item indicates the level of expectation they assign to this area, and it also indicates the amount of value they associate with this item. Often an institution communicates value or the expectations that students should place on an area by the way they market or position themselves in a particular area. An institution can then better identify the fit between the student body and the institution when performance gaps are captured through the combination of satisfaction and importance data. A smaller performance gap indicates a better fit; a larger gap indicates more incongruence and an area of concern.

Responding is the key

Conducting satisfaction assessment is a way to show online learners that the institution cares about their perceptions and their educational experience, but an even more significant way that an institution can show that it cares is by actively responding to student-identified issues. Once data has been collected, actively reviewed, and shared throughout the campus, then initiatives can be identified to respond to online learner concerns. Data on the shelf has no power; data actively used to drive decision making can have the power to improve the success of the institution.

In the complex environment of today's higher education world, conducting satisfaction assessment is a way to ensure the vitality of the institution. Regular satisfaction assessment and active response to the issues shows the institutional stakeholders good stewardship of scarce resources in an optimal way. This practice inspires trust among stakeholders, including online learners, boards of trustees, and even state legislatures.

It is also appropriate to note that satisfaction assessment should be a systematic process, not a one-time event. Shifts in satisfaction and expectations that are tracked over time can identify where institutions are responding appropriately and what new issues are current priorities. Data that is timely and relevant will have the highest impact. Online learner characteristics and perceptions can change, and campus leaders will want to understand these changes in order to meet the transforming needs and circumstances of the student body.

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A note about reviewing the data

While reviewing national results is vital for understanding the higher education marketplace, identification of individual institutional strengths and challenges is best done through data collected for those colleges. Campus leaders can identify their institution's unique strengths and challenges from the perceptions of their own online learners.

The study

The 2005 National Online Learners Priorities Report presents the responses to the Noel-Levitz Priorities Survey for Online Learners™ (PSOL) of 16,551 students from 60 institutions. The results include online learner responses over a four-year time period, from 2001 through 2005. (For further description of the survey tool and the list of participating institutions, please see the appendix.)

Importance—Satisfaction—Performance Gap

On the PSOL, students respond to statements of expectation with an importance rating and a satisfaction rating. These ratings are on a 1 to 7 scale, with 7 being high. The student responses are averaged to produce an importance score and a satisfaction score for each item. A performance gap is calculated by subtracting the satisfaction score from the importance score. A larger performance gap indicates that the institution is not meeting student expectations; a smaller performance gap indicates that the institution is doing a relatively good job of meeting expectations. Negative performance gaps indicate the institution is exceeding student expectations; negative gaps are rare and are more likely to be found on items of low importance to students.

Reviewing the 2005 data

The 2005 National Online Learners Priorities Report includes the following data analyses:

- **A demographic overview to identify who online learners are.**
- **The scales in order of importance.** The scales represent the individual items on the survey which have been clustered together conceptually and statistically. (For a complete description of each scale, please see the appendix.) The scales are presented for the overall online learner responses.
- **Strengths and challenges.** Strengths are identified as areas of high importance and high satisfaction. Challenges are defined as areas of high importance and low satisfaction and/or large performance gap. This section identifies online learners' key priorities for improvement as well as the top areas for celebration.
- **A review of enrollment factors in order of importance.** This section helps institutions consider the top influencers in students' decisions to enroll in an online program.
- **A review of sources of information in order of importance.** This section identifies the key sources of information for online learners in their decision to enroll in an online program.

The results

The demographics

A review of the demographics for the online learners gives a better view of who today's online learners are, based on the students who participated in this study:

Gender: 68% female; 32% male

Age: 21% under the age of 24; 75% age 25-54; 4% 55 and over

Ethnicity/Race: 74% Caucasian/White; 12% African-American; 4% Hispanic; 3% Asian; 7% other race

Enrollment status: 78% primarily online; 22% primarily on campus

Current class load: 58% full-time; 42% part-time

Class level: 19% first year; 21% second year; 14% third year; 11% fourth year; 30% graduate/professional; 4% other class level

Employment: 70% employed full-time; 17% employed part-time; 13% not employed

Current residence: 59% own house; 28% rent room/apartment/house; 9% relative's home; 1% residence hall; 3% other residence

Marital status: 37% married with children; 31% single; 18% married; 11% single with children; 3% prefer not to respond

Current educational plans: 61% complete online degree program; 21% complete degree on campus; 9% transfer credits; 9% complete this course

Current online enrollment: 27% one to three credits; 33% four to six credits; 16% seven to nine credits; 12% 10 to 12 credits; 4% 13 to 15 credits; 8% more than 15 credits

Previous online enrollment: 25% no classes; 37% one to three classes; 15% four to six classes; 8% seven to nine classes; 7% 10 to 12 classes; 2% 13 to 15 classes; 6% more than 15 classes

Educational goal: 33% bachelor's degree; 20% doctoral or professional degree; 23% master's degree; 18% associate's degree; 6% other educational goal

The majority of online learners in this study are female, Caucasian, primarily enrolled online with a full-time class load. A majority are at the undergraduate level and employed full-time while working on their degree. A little over half of the students are married and the majority own their own home. Most of the students plan to complete their degree online but are taking fewer then six credits currently. They are also new to online programs with the majority having taken fewer than three classes. Over forty percent of the students have a graduate-level goal of doctorate or master's degree.

These national demographics may vary from the demographics of individual institutions.

The scales

The best place to begin reviewing the data is by looking at the big picture and understanding the areas that matter most to online learners. The following table summarizes the importance, satisfaction, and performance gaps for five areas (scales) for online learners completing the survey. The scales are listed in order of importance.

Online learners: National results by scale

Scale	Importance	Satisfaction	*Performance Gap*
Institutional Perceptions	**6.39**	5.73	*0.66*
Enrollment Services	**6.38**	5.81	*0.57*
Instructional Services	**6.36**	5.70	*0.66*
Student Services	**6.28**	5.57	*0.71*
Academic Services	**6.27**	5.58	*0.69*

All five areas are rated with relatively high importance. There is little variance between the top scale and the bottom scale. Online learners also report relatively high satisfaction across all categories, with small performance gaps. This indicates that institutions are meeting online student expectations in most areas of the educational experience.

Strengths

Individual items on the inventory were analyzed to determine institutional strengths (high importance and high satisfaction). Institutions often incorporate their strengths into their marketing activities, recruiting materials, and internal and external public relations opportunities, as well as providing positive feedback for campus personnel and online students. *Strengths are defined as those items above the mid-point in importance and in the top quartile of satisfaction.*

The following strengths were identified by online learners (in order of importance):

- Student assignments are clearly defined in the syllabus.
- Registration for online courses is convenient.
- Program requirements are clear and reasonable.
- Instructional materials are appropriate for program content.
- Billing and payment procedures are convenient for me.
- Assessment and evaluation procedures are clear and reasonable.
- The bookstore provides timely service to students.

Institutions are doing well in serving online learners with registration, billing, evaluation procedures, and bookstore services. Students also feel that assignments are clearly defined, requirements are reasonable, and instructional materials are appropriate.

Challenges

Survey items were analyzed to determine key challenges (high importance and low satisfaction). These are crucial areas to address to improve retention (each institution will have its own list of challenges). Nationally, online learners have high expectations in these areas, but institutions failed to meet those expectations. Areas of dissatisfaction were prioritized by their importance score, indicating those areas that mattered most to online learners. *Challenges are defined as being above the mid-point in importance and in the bottom quartile of satisfaction and/or the top quartile of performance gaps.*

Following, listed in order of importance, are the top challenges identified by online learners:

- The quality of instruction is excellent.
- Faculty are responsive to student needs.
- Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.
- Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress.
- There are sufficient opportunities within my program of study.

Institutions have opportunities to improve the interaction between online faculty and students with responsiveness, timely feedback, and the perception of quality of instruction. Additional training and support for online faculty may help respond to these issues. Online learners also expect expanded program offerings in their program of study indicating that institutions may want to further explore extending their online courses. The issue of tuition paid is also one identified by traditional students and adult learners in bricks-and-mortar programs. This is a universal issue that institutions must face to further communicate the value of the educational experience in exchange for the tuition dollar.

Enrollment factors

Institutions should be aware of the factors which influence their online learners' decision to enroll in the program. Institutions often use this type of information to shape their recruitment activities. In this study, the enrollment factors indicated in descending order of importance for online learners were as follows:

Rank	Item	Importance
1	Convenience	6.75
2	Work schedule	6.62
3	Flexible pacing for completing a program	6.58
4	Program requirements	6.38
5	Cost	6.16
6 (tie)	Ability to transfer credits	6.15
6 (tie)	Reputation of institution	6.15
8	Future employment opportunities	6.04
9	Financial assistance available	5.98
10	Distance from campus	5.53
11	Recommendations from employer	4.71

Convenience was the primary motivating factor for enrollment in the online program, followed closely by work schedule. Flexible pacing and program requirements also played a strong factor in enrollment decision making. Recommendations from an employer were not really an important factor in the students' decision.

Sources of information

Online learners indicated the following sources of information in descending order of importance which influenced their enrollment in the online program:

Rank	Item	Importance
1	Web site	6.19
2	Catalog (online)	5.97
3	Recommendations from instructor or program advisor	5.33
4	Catalog and brochures (printed)	5.26
5	College representative	5.18
6	Contact with current students and/or recent graduates of the program	5.00
7	Advertisements	4.16

Not surprisingly, the primary source of information for online programs was the Web site, followed by the online catalog. Contact with current students or recent graduates and advertisements were not important sources of information for most students.

What does this mean for your campus?

Survey your online learners. Effective institutions survey their constituencies regularly, compare their data to their past performance, and then actively respond to the challenges. It is important to be aware of national trends for a broader perspective, but the perception of your own online learners is the most meaningful.

Note: additional information on the satisfaction levels and priorities of students nationally as well as the perspective of campus faculty, staff, and administrators is included in the Noel-Levitz National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report. The section on "Common Responses and Practices" highlights some ways that campuses are responding to the data to make tangible changes on campus. While these responses are primarily focused for students on campus, similar responses may also be appropriate for students in online programs. You are encouraged to review this report for a broader perspective. It is available at **www.noellevitz.com**.

A word about Noel-Levitz

A trusted partner to higher education, Noel-Levitz helps systems and campuses reach and exceed their goals for enrollment, marketing, and student success. Over the past three decades, the higher education professionals at Noel-Levitz have consulted directly with over 1,700 colleges and universities nationwide in the areas of:

- Student retention
- Staff and advisor development
- Student success
- Marketing and recruitment
- Financial aid services
- Research and communications
- Institutional effectiveness

Noel-Levitz has developed an array of proven tools and software programs; diagnostic tools and instruments; video-based training programs; and customized consultations, workshops, and national conferences. With the Satisfaction-Priorities Surveys (including the Priorities Survey for Online Learners), the firm brings together its many years of research and campus-based experience to enable you to get to the heart of your campus agenda.

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Appendix I. The scales

The items on the Priorities Survey for Online Learners have been analyzed statistically and conceptually to create scales. The scales provide composite scores that allow for an overview of the data. The scales are as follows:

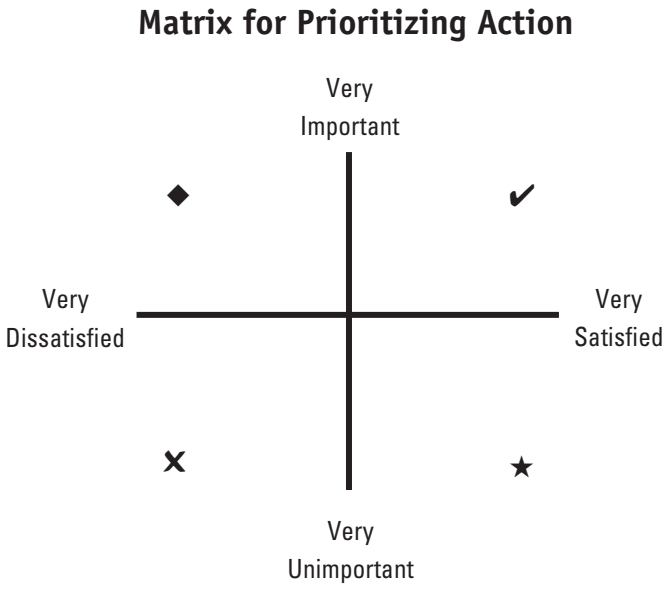
- **Institutional Perceptions** assesses how students perceive your institution.
- **Academic Services** assesses the services students utilize to achieve their academic goals. These services include advising, course offerings, technical assistance, online library resources, and tutoring services.
- **Instructional Services** measures students' academic experience, the instructional materials, the faculty/student interactions, evaluation procedures, and the quality of the instruction.
- **Enrollment Services** assesses the processes and services related to enrolling students in the online program, including financial aid, registration, and payment procedures.
- **Student Services** measures the quality of student programs and services, including responses to student requests, online career services, and the bookstore.

Appendix II. Sample items

Priorities Survey for Online Learners
Sample Items

Importance to me… (1 = not important at all; 2 = not very important; 3 = somewhat unimportant; 4 = neutral; 5 = somewhat important; 6 = important; 7 = very important)		…My level of satisfaction (1 = not satisfied at all; 2 = not very satisfied; 3 = somewhat dissatisfied; 4 = neutral; 5 = somewhat satisfied; 6 = satisfied; 7 = very satisfied)
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	My program advisor is accessible by telephone and e-mail.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Instructional materials are appropriate for program content.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Student-to-student collaborations are valuable to me.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Appropriate technical assistance is readily available.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	Online career services are available.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦	I am aware of whom to contact for questions about programs and services.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦

Appendix III. Matrix for prioritizing action



◆ **High importance/low satisfaction**

pinpoints areas that should claim the institution's immediate attention, i.e., retention agenda/priorities

✔ **High importance/high satisfaction**

showcases the institution's areas of strength that should be highlighted in promotional materials

✖ **Low importance/low satisfaction**

presents an opportunity for the institution to examine those areas that have low status with students

★ **Low importance/high satisfaction**

suggests areas from which it might be beneficial to redirect institutional resources to areas of higher importance

Appendix IV. Institutional participants

Alaska Pacific University, AK
Allen College, IA
American Institute of Business, IA
Appalachian Technical College, GA
Augusta Technical College, GA
Baker College Online, MI
Barton County Community College, KS
Bemidji State University, MN
Bismarck State College, ND
Black Hills State University, SD
Brenau University, GA
Bryant & Stratton College, NY
Capella University, MN
Cardinal Stritch University, WI
Cedar Valley College, TX
Cedarville University, OH
Central Texas College, TX
Cerro Coso Community College, CA
Chippewa Valley Technical College, WI
College of the Mainland, TX
Crown College, MN
Dallas TeleCollege, TX
DeVry Online, IL
Duquesne University, PA
Eastern University, PA
El Paso Community College, TX
Fayetteville State University, NC
Florida Hospital College of Health, FL
Fort Hays State University, KS
Grambling State University, LA
Grand Canyon University, AZ
Hutchinson Community College, KS
Illinois Institute Technology, IL
Jones International University,
Lake Superior College, MN
Lee University, TN
Manatee Community College, FL
Metropolitan State College of Denver, CO
North Dakota State College of Science, ND
Northcentral University, AZ
Northeast Wisconsin Technical, WI
Northwest Missouri State University, MO
Northwest Technical College, MN
Northwood University, IN
Ouachita Technical College, AR
Palm Beach Atlantic University, FL
SUNY College of Technology at Delhi, NY
Santa Fe Community College, FL
Shoreline Community College, WA
South Central Technical College, MN
Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, AB
Southern California University, CA
Taft College, CA
Texas Woman's University, TX
Union University, TN
University of Toledo, OH
University of Wyoming, WY
Virginia College, VA
Wayne County Community College, MI
Westmoreland County Community College, PA

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About Noel-Levitz

A trusted partner to higher education, Noel-Levitz helps systems and campuses reach and exceed their goals for enrollment, marketing, and student success.

To help with goal attainment, our 30 full-time consultants and 50 associates bring direct experience from their previous and current positions on campuses as consultants, enrollment managers, marketing leaders, retention directors, institutional researchers, financial aid directors, faculty, student affairs leaders, advising directors, and more.