

Research Reports

Institutional Assessment
Boise State University

A Survey of Current & Potential Graduate Students

Research Report 96-04

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August 1996

ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken at the request of the Enrollment Management Committee. As part of the overall plan to manage enrollment at BSU over the next few years, the committee proposed that the percentage of FTE from graduate credits move from 5% to 10% of the total. This study reports on the results of a survey that asked current and potential graduate students what obstacles kept them from enrolling in graduate school, which services they would find most helpful to attract and retain them, reasons why they might pursue a graduate degree, and general perceptions of BSU.

The survey was based on a sample of 300 current graduate students, 300 students who were seniors with good GPAs, and 100 respondents working around Boise mainly in the areas of technology and education. About half returned the survey.

Obstacles to Graduate Study:

- The biggest obstacles, 65% of the respondents agreed, were finances and work schedules.
- About half thought program or course availability was an obstacle.
- The enrollment process and motivation were least likely to be viewed as obstacles. Only a fourth agreed these were obstacles.

- For current graduate students, work schedule and course availability were considered the biggest impediments while finances were the biggest obstacle for potential graduate students.

Desirable Services:

- The most desired service was summer courses; 68% agreed summer courses would make it more likely for them to attend and complete graduate school.
- About 55% thought graduate assistantships and courses through distance learning would be desirable.
- Childcare at BSU and graduate student housing were services that respondents were least likely to mention as helping their attendance. They were selected by 22% and 13% of the respondents respectively.

Reasons to Attend Graduate School:

- Most (90%) respondents thought a graduate degree would be personally satisfying. This was the most frequent reason given for attending graduate school.
- Slightly over 80% thought graduate study was attractive because it could advance their career, while over 70% found it attractive because they would earn more.
- Only about 20% thought it was attractive because their job required it.

Perceptions of BSU:

- Respondents were most likely to agree that BSU has quality faculty (63% agreement) and a good academic reputation (62% agreement).
- Only about half agreed that BSU has modern labs and equipment or that there is good support for the graduate programs.
- When asked if BSU has a good academic reputation, potential graduate students were most likely to agree.
- When asked if BSU has modern laboratories and equipment, current graduate students were *least likely* to agree.

Findings indicate that potential graduate students differ very little from current graduate students except that they are slightly younger. It appears that a vast majority of graduate students will continue to enroll on a part-time basis, sandwiching courses between work and other commitments.

A SURVEY OF CURRENT AND POTENTIAL GRADUATE STUDENTS

As an institution that began as a junior college without land-grant or other federal status, BSU has focused on the primary mission of undergraduate education. Graduate-level programs and services have traditionally taken a backseat. Though master's degrees have been offered for 25 years, the enrollments have been small compared to the baccalaureate and vocational/technical programs. As part of the current emphasis on enrollment management, however, graduate enrollment is being studied with the goal of boosting enrollment at the graduate level from 5% of total FTE to 10%.

A review of the literature turned up very little about recruitment and retention of graduate students. To begin the process, therefore, it was decided that information was needed on who our graduate and potential graduate students are, what obstacles they see to enrolling and staying in graduate school, what things would attract them to BSU, and what their general perceptions are of BSU as a graduate-level academic institution. The survey developed to gather this information can be found in Appendix A.

Who Was Surveyed?

In order to obtain as broad a picture as possible, both current and prospective graduate students were surveyed. Among current graduate students, all students with a graduate classification who had active records in the spring of 1996 were selected. Of the 2,976 students who fit this definition, a sample of 300 was drawn. After eliminating any students with addresses outside the United States, the final sample was 297.

To survey potential graduate students, two approaches were used. First, we assumed that many of the enrollments in graduate school came from those who completed their undergraduate work here and had done well. Thus, all students who were classified as seniors with a grade point average of 2.75 or better were selected as the sample population. From the 3,271 students who met this definition, a sample of 300 was drawn. After eliminating foreign addresses, the final sample was 299. This sample represented students who might possibly be continuing their education at BSU soon at the graduate level.

We wanted to also include respondents who were not directly linked to BSU. Thus, graduate students who were enrolled in a research course in the department of Instructional and Performance Technology at BSU were asked to help. Besides reviewing the literature, interviewing individuals with a perspective on the issue and developing initial items, the group took 100 surveys and distributed them at their work sites and to friends. Most surveys were distributed either at Micron or in the public school system. In this way, potential graduates who did not currently have contact with BSU could be surveyed.

Of the 696 surveys distributed, 352 or 51% were returned. About 55 were from the group of 100 distributed by the class. Thus, 297 or about 50% of those sampled from BSU returned their surveys.

About 30% of the returns were from students currently in graduate school; 104 students indicated that they were currently enrolled in graduate programs, and 97 indicated they were in

graduate programs at BSU. They formed the basis of the “Current Graduate Student” group. Most of these students were majoring in Business, Education, or Educational Technology/Instructional and Performance Technology (see Table 1 for a listing of majors).

Of the 235 who said they were not in graduate school, 144 or 61% said they were interested in graduate school. These students formed the group of “Potential Graduate Students.” The remaining respondents who indicated they were not interested in graduate school were placed in a third group of “Uninterested Respondents.”

Most respondents (60%) were female. There was some variability by gender in the three groups but not enough to be statistically significant. The groups did, however, differ significantly in age. About 36% of current graduate students were between 26 and 30 and an additional 31% were between 31 and 40. Potential graduate students were younger while those who were not interested in graduate school were more likely to be older (see Table 2).

Major	Number	Percentage
Education	21	25%
Business	15	18%
Education Technology/IPT	15	18%
History	6	7%
Exercise Physiology	4	5%
Public Administration	4	5%
Counseling	3	4%
Interdisciplinary Studies	3	4%
Music	3	4%
Geology/Geophysics	2	2%
Social Work	2	2%
English	2	2%
Raptor Biology	1	1%
Nursing	1	1%
Engineering	1	1%
Communication	1	1%
Total	84	100%

Age	Current		Interested		Not Interested		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
21-25	7	9%	33	26%	13	16%	53	18%
26-30	29	36%	28	22%	18	22%	75	26%
31-40	25	31%	33	26%	19	23%	77	27%
41 & Over	20	25%	34	27%	31	38%	85	29%
	81	100%	128	100%	81	100%	290	100%
$\chi^2 = 16.6, p < .01$								

What Factors Did Respondents See as Obstacles to Completing a Graduate Degree?

Family obligations, work schedule, finances, program/course availability, the enrollment process, and motivation were all felt to be obstacles which could keep people from pursuing a graduate degree. Respondents selected a “1” if they strongly agreed that each was an obstacle, “2” if they agreed it was an obstacle, a “3” if they disagreed that it was an obstacle, a “4” if they strongly disagreed, and a “5” if the factor was not applicable for them. Thus, the lower the number, the more the factor was perceived as an obstacle. Table 3 displays the results.

Table 3				
Rating of Obstacles to Graduate Study				
Obstacle	Mean	Standard_ Deviation	N	% Agreeing
Finances	2.26	1.22	321	65.4
Work Schedule	2.36	1.28	331	65.0
Program/course availability	2.50	1.30	320	51.6
Family Obligations	2.65	1.42	326	55.8
Enrollment Process	3.06	1.14	312	28.2
Motivation	3.17	1.14	312	26.6

Finances and work schedules were the two greatest obstacles perceived by the group, while availability of courses or programs of study were in a more distant third place. About 65% agreed finances and work schedule were obstacles while slightly more than half thought the availability of courses or programs were. Table 4 summarizes the programs of study that the potential graduate students were interested in. Many of the programs are already offered, especially in Business, Education, and Technology, the top three vote-getters.

The only difference between current and potential graduate students was in the area of financing their education, with potential graduate students seeing it as more of an obstacle than current students. Figure 1 displays the comparative mean agreement ratings of the obstacles for current and potential graduates. Note that for current graduate students, work schedule and course availability were considered the biggest impediments while finances were the biggest obstacle for potential graduate students.

Table 4.
Areas of Interest for Graduate Students

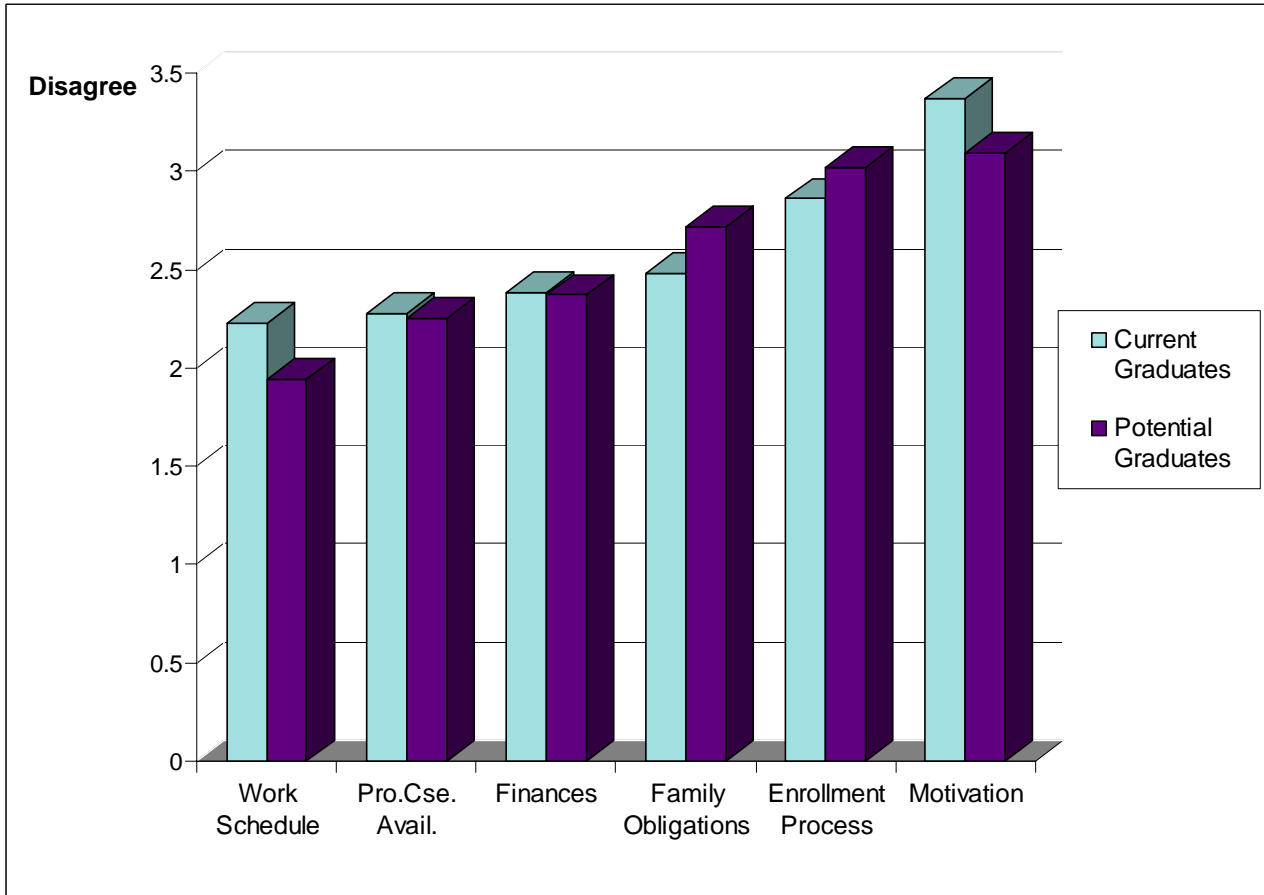
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION			COLLEGE OF BUSINESS		
General	23	32%	General	7	14%
Special Education	3	4%	MBA	14	28%
Early Childhood	6	8%	*Management	4	8%
*Adult Education	4	6%	*Marketing	6	12%
*Vocational Education	2	3%	Accounting	5	10%
Physical Education	3	4%	*International Business	2	4%
Reading	5	7%	*Production Management	3	6%
Curriculum & Instruction	1	1%	*Human Resources Management	3	6%
*Education Administration	3	4%	*Small Business Administration	1	2%
*Math	1	1%	*Economics	2	4%
Science	3	4%	CIS	2	4%
Elementary Education	2	3%	*Finance	1	2%
Bilingual Education	1	1%			
Education Technology	4	6%	Subtotal	50	20%
Counseling	6	8%			
Athletic Administration/Training	3	4%			
Other	1	1%			
Subtotal	71	28%			
TECHNOLOGY/COMPUTERS			HEALTH SCIENCE		
General	3	17%	General	4	14%
Production Management/MLS	2	11%	*Nursing	7	24%
IPT	12	67%	*Nutrition	3	10%
Network Consultant	1	6%	*Respiratory Care	1	3%
Subtotal	18	7%	*Physical Therapy	1	3%
			*Radiology	1	3%
			*Occupational Therapy	1	3%
			*Environmental Health	1	3%
			*Occupational Health	1	3%
			*Rehabilitation	2	7%
			*Medicine	3	10%
			*Health Care Administration	1	3%
			*Speech Pathology	1	3%
			Health Policy	1	3%
			*Toxicology	1	3%
			Subtotal	29	11%
ARTS & SCIENCES			OTHER		
Art	5	26%	*Administration	1	8%
Graphic Design	1	5%	*Forestry	2	15%
Music	2	11%	*National Resources	2	15%
*Theatre/Drama	2	11%	*American Studies	1	8%
Raptor Biology	3	16%	*Human Performance	1	8%
*Physics	1	5%	*Women's Studies	1	8%
Geology	3	16%	*Engineering	3	23%
*Biochemistry	1	5%	*Construction Management	1	8%
*Foreign Language	1	5%	*Geography	1	8%
	19	7%	Subtotal	13	5%
SOCIAL SCIENCES & PUBLIC AFFAIRS					
History	7	13%	Total	254	100%
Social Work	13	24%			
Communication	4	7%			
*Sociology	2	4%			
Public Administration	7	13%			
*Law	5	9%			
*Psychology	10	19%			
*Criminal Justice	4	7%			
*Political Science	1	2%			
General	1	2%			
Subtotal	54	21%			

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Percentages subject to rounding error

*No current graduate program available

Figure 1. Obstacles to Graduate Study



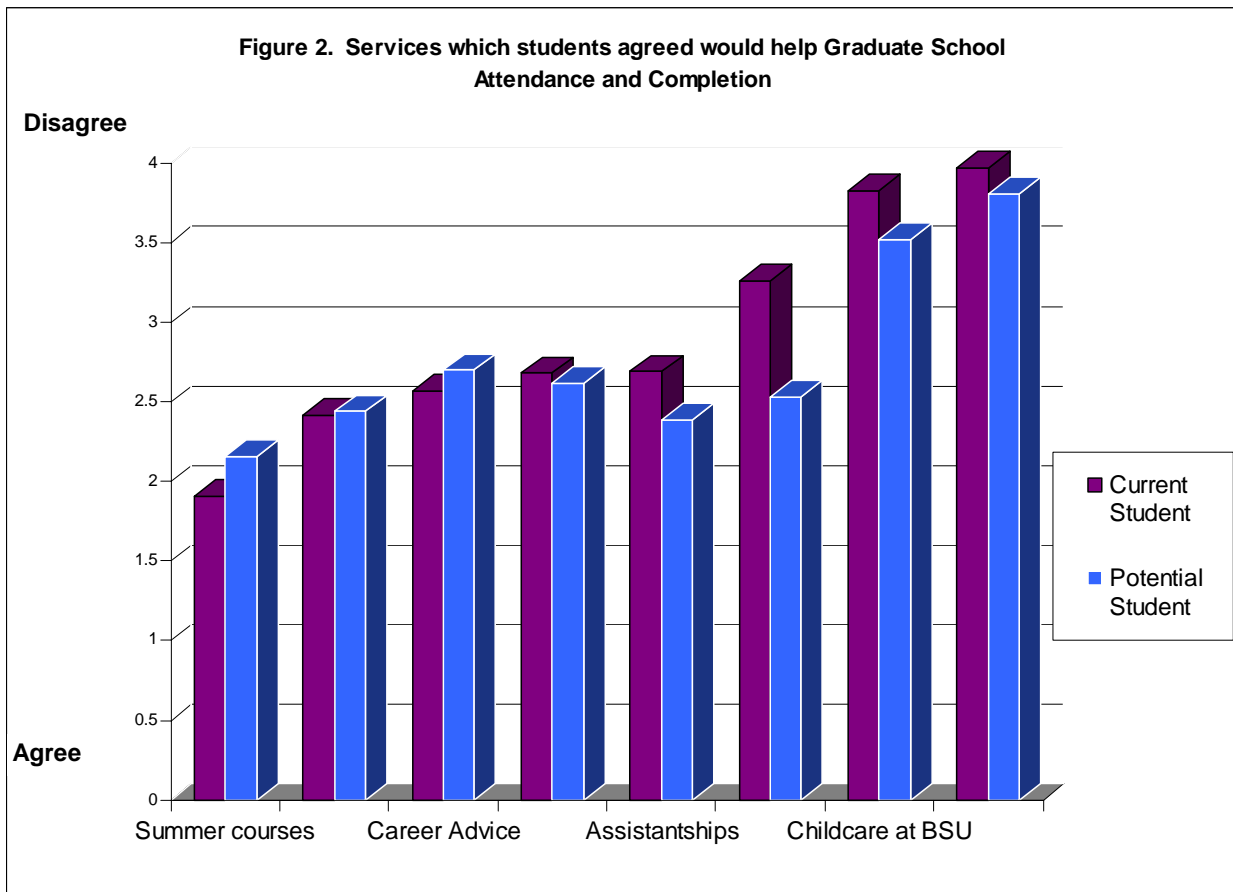
What Services Would Make it More Likely for Students to Attend and Complete Graduate School?

Using the same 1-to-5 scale, respondents were asked to rate the following eight services according to how much they agreed that the service would help them attend and complete graduate school: child care at BSU, graduate assistantships, graduate student housing, career advisement, internships with local employers, courses offered through distance learning, summer courses, and programs in their areas of interest. Again, lower numbers indicate stronger agreement.

The service rated most helpful was summer courses. This was followed by graduate assistantships and courses offered through distance learning. Childcare and graduate student housing were last in the ratings. See Table 5 for details.

Service	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	% Agreeing
Summer courses	2.24	1.24	314	68.2
Graduate Assistantships	2.62	1.44	322	55.6
Distance Learning Courses	2.64	1.41	312	53.5
Internships with Employers	2.73	1.48	317	53.0
Career Advisement	2.81	1.39	317	48.9
Programs/courses	2.88	1.73	172	51.7
Childcare at BSU	3.82	1.45	323	22.0
Graduate Student Housing	3.88	1.22	314	13.1

In no instances were significant differences found between current graduate students and potential graduate students on their ratings of each service. There were some differences, however, in the order of the mean ratings the two groups gave for services. Current graduate students rated “more summer courses” as the service they would like most, followed by courses through distance learning and career advice. Potential graduate students also rated summer courses as the service they would most like to see. This was followed, however, by graduate assistantships and then courses through distance learning. See Figure 2 for details.



What Attracts Students to Graduate School?

Of all the reasons students might attend graduate school, the most important reason by far, respondents said, was that they would find it personally satisfying. In order of importance, this was followed by the reasons of career advancement and improved earnings. Respondents were least likely to agree that they would pursue a graduate degree because of job requirements. See Table 6 for details.

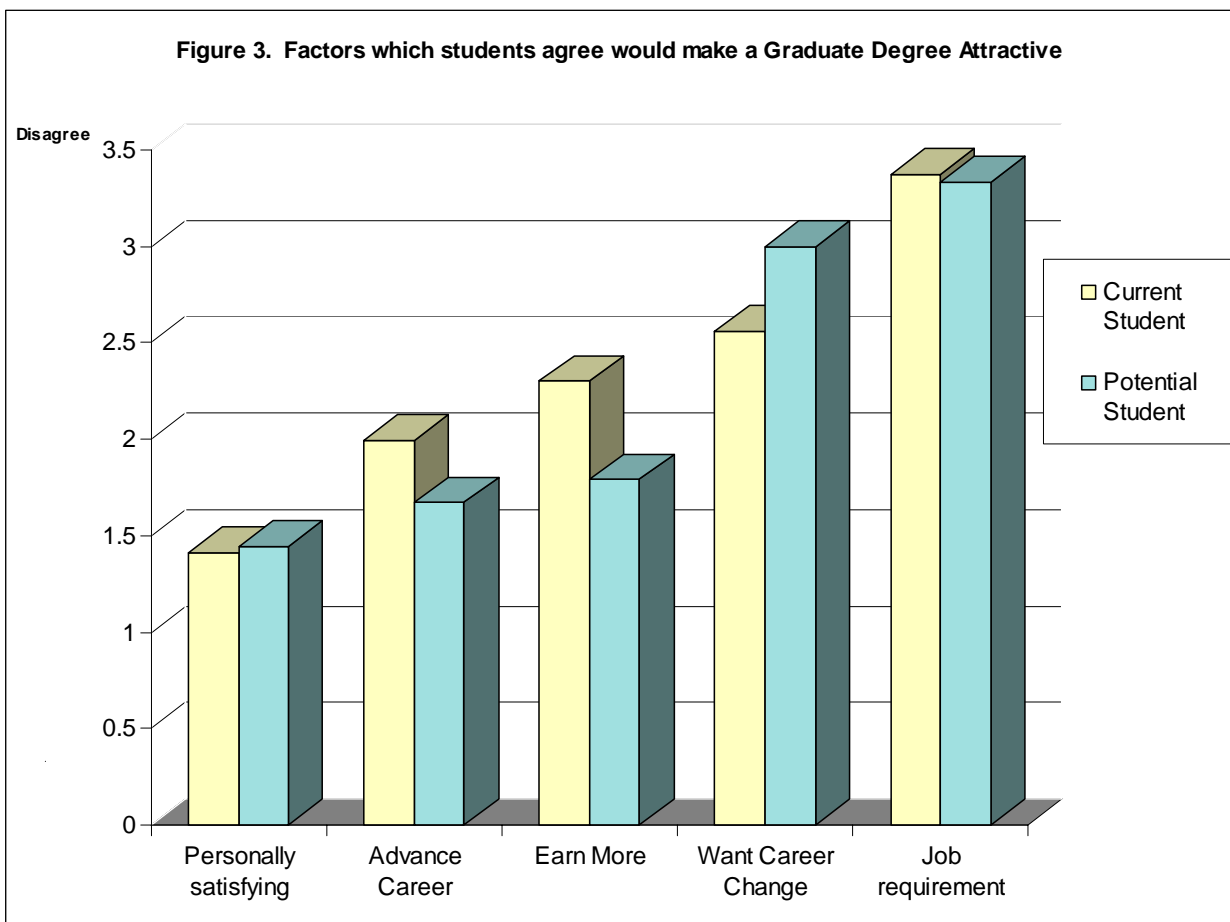
Table 6				
Ratings of Why a Graduate Degree would be Attractive				
	Mean	Standard _Deviation	N	% Agreeing
Personally satisfying	1.65	0.95	323	90.1
Advance career	1.91	1.14	327	82.3
Earn more	2.16	1.27	330	72.7
Want career change	2.98	1.34	320	39.7
Job Requirement	3.50	1.26	315	21.6

As expected, there were differences between current and potential students on ratings of reasons students might be attracted to graduate school. Potential graduate students were more likely to consider increased earnings as a reason than current graduate students. The two groups also differed from each other on wanting a career change as a reason with current graduate students more strongly agreeing that this was a reason. Figure 3 shows the mean ratings for current and potential graduate students on the five reasons students might be attracted to graduate school. The order was the same for both current and potential students.

What are the General Perceptions of BSU?

In order to discover how respondents felt about BSU and whether this differed for those in or considering graduate school compared to those not interested, respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement to four statements:

- BSU has a good academic reputation.
- BSU has quality faculty.
- BSU has modern laboratories and equipment.
- There is good support for graduate programs at BSU.



Respondents were most likely to agree that BSU has quality faculty with 63% agreeing. This was followed by academic reputation (62% agreement), modern labs and equipment (55% agreement) and support for graduate study (47% agreement). Results can be found in Table 7. Again, lower means indicate more agreement with the statement.

Item:	Mean	Standard _Deviation	N	% Agreeing
BSU has quality faculty	2.16	0.76	329	62.6
BSU has good academic reputation	2.36	0.83	322	61.5
BSU has modern labs & equipment	2.69	1.14	326	55.2
Good support for graduate programs	2.81	1.07	316	46.5

Differences among the groups were found for two of the four statements (See Table 8). For academic reputation, potential graduate students more strongly agreed that BSU has a good academic reputation than either current graduate students or uninterested respondents. Current graduate students were *less likely* to agree that BSU has modern laboratories and equipment than either potential graduate students or uninterested respondents.

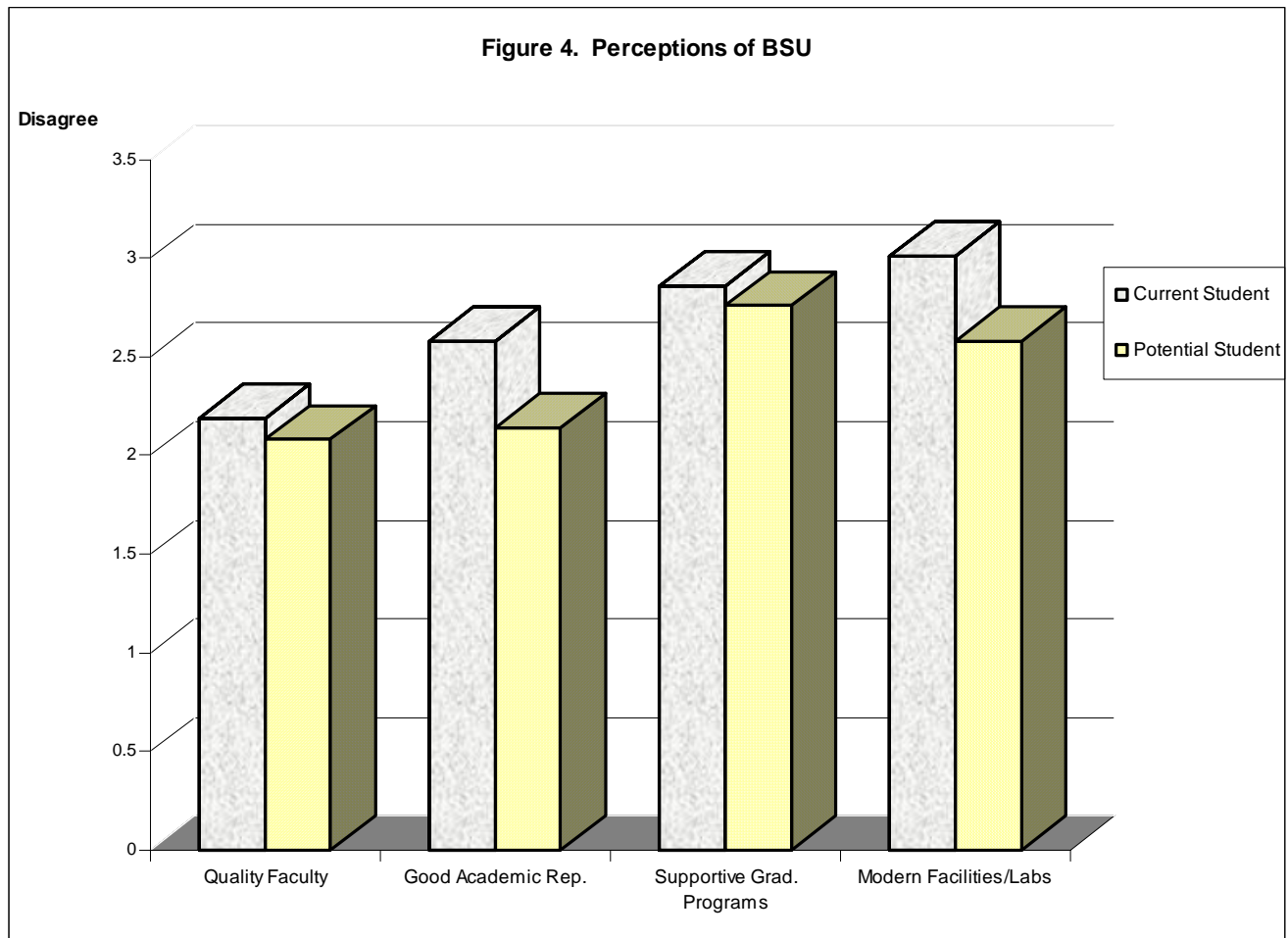
Service	Group 1 _Current	Group 2 _Potential	Group 3 Uninterested	Significant Difference _Between
Good Academic Reputation	2.58	2.14	2.47	2 & 3
Modern Labs and Equipment	3.01	2.58	2.55	1 & 3, 1 & 2
<p>Note: Significance levels of .05 or better were used to test for statistical significance. One way ANOVA with follow-up comparisons using Tukey's HSD were employed.</p>				

Both current and potential students rated quality faculty highest, then academic reputation. The differences were in how strongly they agreed. See Figure 4 for further details.

Other Comments From Respondents

The end of the survey offered a place for respondents to make comments, and many of them chose to do so. Most of the comments focused on what BSU needs. At the top of the list of needs was a better selection of programs at the graduate level (mentioned in 15 responses). One respondent noted, for example, that BSU needs to have a “wider selection in the master’s program for teachers.” Another indicated that he/she was “presently taking [an] undergraduate major because no graduate programs or even graduates courses [were available] in Theatre.” Other examples can be found by scanning the comments in Appendix B and looking at areas of interest respondents noted.

Closely followed by comments about more programs were comments about the need for better instruction. This theme occurred in 13 of the comments. One of the respondents wrote, “I found some of the professors very negative. I had a difficult time finishing some courses because of their attitude. It reflected in my grades in these classes.” Another respondent wrote, “Faculty needs to work collaboratively to create quality programs. Programs and courses need to cross department lines through the university. Tenured faculty need to be accountable.”



Other needs were mentioned by much smaller numbers of respondents. Needs that were mentioned by four or five respondents include better enrollment processes, better program support, better record-keeping by the University (mainly from students who should not have received the survey), and more flexibility in dealing with students and their needs.

Most of the remaining responses were related to personal problems or issues that respondents had. The two most frequently mentioned issues were that family and/or financial obstacles did not allow the respondent to pursue a graduate degree at this time and that there were no real incentives for the respondent to pursue an additional degree. A full listing of the comments can be found in Appendix B.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to survey current and potential graduate students on the obstacles they face, the services they want, the reasons they might have for attending graduate school, and the perceptions of BSU that might influence their decision to begin or continue graduate study.

Respondents reported that the biggest obstacles that they needed to overcome in order to attend and remain in graduate school were related to work and to finances. Potential graduate students in particular were most likely to agree that finances were an obstacle. Current graduate students

worried more about getting courses and juggling their work schedule. Most of those who indicated that lack of programs/courses in their area of interest was an obstacle named programs that were already available (leading one to wonder how much of an obstacle it truly was). One area, however, that respondents mentioned fairly frequently was the desirability to have graduate degrees in the health sciences and social sciences; the particular area varied widely, however, from respondent to respondent.

The top service that respondents thought would attract and retain them in graduate school was the offering of more summer courses. The other areas in the top three were graduate assistantships and courses/programs offered through distance learning. There were few differences between current and potential graduate students in this area.

Personal satisfaction was given as the main reason why someone would want a graduate degree. For current enrollees, career change was another major reason. For potential graduate students, the appeal of improved earnings was important. These differences could have been a function of age as well as enrollment status, however, since current enrollees were somewhat older than the potential enrollee group.

In general, findings indicate that potential graduate enrollees differ in very few ways from the current graduate enrollees. One implication of this finding is that most graduate students will continue to be part-time, fitting graduate courses into a full work schedule. They will continue to want a more flexible and non-traditional course delivery system, such as one that provides courses during the summer and through distance learning.

Any efforts to attract graduate students should emphasize the personal satisfaction that can be derived from pursuing and obtaining a graduate degree. Two areas probably will need to be addressed in order to significantly expand the graduate market. One is the issue of how to finance a graduate education. The second is the perception of BSU as an graduate-level institution. Only 55% agreed BSU has modern labs and equipment, and fewer than half the respondents agreed that there is good support for graduate programs at BSU.