

Graduating Student Assessment of Programs and Boise State Results from the 2014-15 Graduating Student Survey

Abstract

Every fall and spring graduating students are asked to take a survey that asks about their perceived growth in academic and student development areas at the undergraduate level, their perceptions of faculty and their departments, their overall satisfaction, and their activities while at Boise State. Results indicate graduates are generally pleased with their majors and Boise State experience. Graduate students were generally more satisfied compared to undergraduates despite a drop in graduate advising and involvement with faculty research. Education graduates were the most satisfied at both levels of study. There is a little evidence of differential satisfaction between transfer and non-transfer undergraduates.

Overview

For almost twenty years, all students who are scheduled to graduate in fall or spring are asked by the Office of Institutional Research to complete a survey about their perceptions of their Boise State experience. The survey asks graduates at both levels about their perceptions of faculty, of their courses, and of their department. They indicate which in a series of activities they took part in, whether they transferred courses and if they had difficulty in doing so. Finally, graduates are asked about their satisfaction with their academic experience at Boise State.

This is a report on findings from the 2014-15 survey regarding student satisfaction with their program of study as well as Boise State overall. The survey was completed by 37% of graduating students, so it provides a fairly good view of graduates' perceptions. The report will address the following questions:

- How satisfied were graduates with their program and with Boise State?
- Does satisfaction vary by college?
- Among undergraduates, does one's experience vary by whether a graduate was a transfer student?

Results

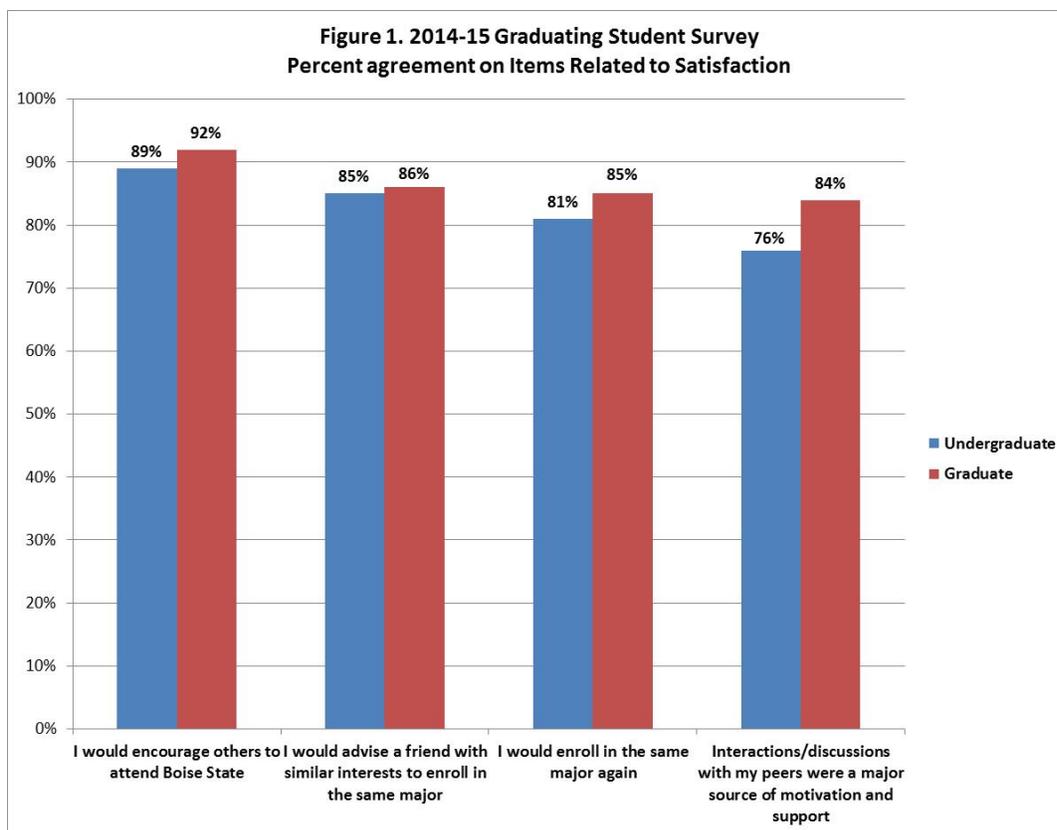
How did students assess their experience with their program and with Boise State?

The graduating student survey includes four items on student satisfaction with their educational experience:

- I would enroll in the same major again
- I would advise a friend with similar interests to enroll in the same major
- I would encourage others to attend Boise State
- Interactions and discussions with peers were a major source of motivation and support

As shown by Figure 1, most students appear to be satisfied with their Boise State experience by indicating they either agreed or strongly agreed with each item. Graduate students evinced higher ratings, though the difference is

very small for the questions regarding attendance at Boise State and advising a friend to enroll in the same major; the gap is marginally larger with regards to whether the graduate would enroll in the same major again. The gaps between undergraduates and graduate students are smaller compared to the same gaps in the 2013-14 survey. This is especially true for whether one would enroll in the same major again: Whereas last year's gap was 10 percentage points, this year's gap is a mere four percentage points.



Among graduate students, there continues to be a downward trend in recommending friends with similar interests to enroll in the same major (mean of 3.28 in 2014-15 v. 3.38 in 2013-14 and 3.48 in 2011-12 on a four-point scale). However, a significant gap still remains between undergraduate and graduate students with regards to interactions with departmental peers. These differences might be reflective of the relatively more cohesive cohort experienced by graduate students and is not necessarily indicative of problems at the undergraduate level.

Engagement in academic, co-curricular, and personal activities

At the end of the survey, students are asked if they had been part of some academic, co-curricular, or personal activities. The results can be found in Table 1. The pattern of the undergraduate findings is similar to undergraduate results from the 2013-14 survey, though responsibilities for children was down five percentage points, and the percentage of undergraduates reporting meeting with an advisor at least every year was up five percentage points. Nearly half of undergraduates and a full two-thirds of graduate students worked full time while attending school. Just under one-third of undergraduates had responsibilities for children.

Table 1. Percentage of students who engaged in academic, co-curricular, and personal activities.

While a student at Boise State, did you...	Undergraduate students	Graduate students
Participate in community service through the university	46%	17%
Participate in student activities (clubs, student government, etc.)	43%	16%
Work with faculty on research, service or creative project	28%	29%
Have responsibilities for children	27%	42%
Work full time while attending school	46%	67%
Take a year or more off to fulfill a military obligation	2%	<1%
Take a year or more off for a religious or service mission	2%	0%
Work on-campus	31%	18%
Live on-campus for at least a year	27%	3%
Meet with an advisor at least every year	62%	35%

Of note are some changes among the graduate students since the 2013-14 survey. Only 17% reported engaging in community service this year, compared to 22% the previous year. More dramatically, 16% said they have participated in student activities, compared to 24% the previous year; 35% met with an advisor at least every year, compared to 47% previously. Similarly, only one-third (29%) reported working with faculty on research, a drop of seven percentage points. The percent of graduate students reporting responsibilities for children also climbed six percentage points over the previous year. Graduates students were also less likely to report working on campus (2013-14: 24%; 2014-15: 18%).

Did satisfaction vary by college?

When the two major-related questions are combined with the Boise State attendance recommendation item into an additive scale ranging from 3-12 ($M = 9.74$, $SD = 2.01$, $\alpha = .79$), there is an overall significant difference among the colleges, $F(5, 1297) = 6.82$, $p < .001$. This is largely driven by Education graduates' higher satisfaction compared to graduates of each other college except Engineering (all $p < .01$).

Among undergraduates exclusively, only one of the four satisfaction measures examined in Figure 1 registered an overall significant set of differences among the colleges: encouraging others to attend Boise State, $F(5, 991) = 2.629$, $p = .011$ (see Table 2). Engineering students exhibited the least enthusiasm followed by Education and Arts/Sciences graduates. Public Service graduates were the most enthusiastic. Again, in absolute terms, these differences are modest and *all* means are above three on a four-point scale, meaning graduates of each college would recommend Boise State to some degree. The combined satisfaction item yielded no significant differences.

Table 2. Undergraduate student mean satisfaction scores by college.

	Recommend Boise State (1-4)	Combined scale (3-12)
Arts & Sciences	3.24	9.56
Business & Economics	3.40	9.72
Education	3.32	9.92
Engineering	3.17	9.82
Health	3.40	9.72
Public Service	3.45	9.81

When we look at graduate students exclusively (Table 3), three of the four satisfaction measures examined in Figure 1 (re-enrolling/recommending same program and encouraging Boise State to others) display overall significant differences among the colleges (all $p < .001$). In terms of reenrolling in the same major/program, Education graduates were particularly pleased, scoring an average higher than those from Business/Economics, Health Sciences, and Public Service ($p < .05$). Similarly, Education graduate students were more likely to recommend their major to someone else compared to graduates from Health Sciences and Public Service ($p < .05$ and lower). Finally, did graduates vary in recommending Boise State to others? Education graduates again felt more positively compared to Arts/Sciences, Health Sciences, and Public Service graduates ($p < .05$ and lower).

None of the other paired sets was significant. In absolute terms, there is more variability across colleges at the graduate level. Education graduates were the most satisfied across all three items. Again, the average graduate of each college would recommend her/his major, with the partial exception of Health Sciences and Public Service graduates.

The combined satisfaction measure yields significant differences overall, $F(5, 302) = 8.44, p < .001$. Education graduates displayed more satisfaction compared to graduates from Business/Economics, Health Sciences and Public Service ($p < .05$). Engineering graduate's students expressed over a point more enthusiasm compared to Health Sciences graduates (+1.3, $p < .05$).

Table 3. Graduate student mean scores by college.

	Same major again (1-4)	Similar interest – same major (1-4)	Recommend Boise State (1-4)	Support from peers (1-4)	Combined scale (3-12)
Arts & Sciences	3.24	3.15	3.29	3.29	9.70
Business & Economics	3.07	3.17	3.45	3.07	9.69
Education	3.52	3.56	3.68	3.24	10.77
Engineering	3.32	3.39	3.52	3.19	10.23
Health	2.89	2.94	3.14	3.03	8.97
Public Service	2.90	2.95	3.14	3.10	9.00

Does one's experience vary by transfer status?¹

Engagement in academic, co-curricular, and personal activities

While there are clear differences between graduate and undergraduate students, what of transfer and non-transfer students in the undergraduate group? A series of cross tabulations reveal that non-transfer students were statistically more likely to participate in community service through the university, participate in clubs, work on campus and live on campus at least one year. Transfer undergraduates were statistically more likely to have responsibilities for children. The groups did not differ in their rates of participation in research, service, or creative projects, working full time, or meeting with an advisor at least every year.

Department/Major

There was no statistically significant difference between undergraduate transfer and non-transfer graduates when asked to rank (a) whether she/he would enroll in the same major/program again, or (b) advise a friend with similar interests to enroll in the same major. However, non-transfers ($M = 3.04$) were more likely than transfers ($M = 2.93$) to say that interactions and discussions with peers in the department were "major source of motivation and support" ($p < .05$).

Among those transfer graduates who chose to elaborate in an open-ended question as to why they would *not* enroll in the same major again or encourage a friend to enroll in the major, some did focus on the curriculum of their program in terms of repetitiveness/unavailability of courses, or broadness of curricula. Some of these issues dovetailed with advising, as evidence by this comment:

The trials and tribulations that I encountered as a [] major were far beyond what any student should have to endure and I know that I was not the only student having to deal with these difficulties. I would still enroll in this major, but would choose a different university, one that offered a more supported program for its students. In this program I was not given pertinent information for my advancement to graduation and I also had classes dropped from the university that were needed to graduate. I also received little to no academic advisement (despite my repeated requests for help) until [] was given my file.

Another segment of concern regarding academic programs among transfer students dealt with administration and/or politics of programs. The most common complaint centered on organization generally and communication with students regarding curricular changes:

This program was very unorganized. Every semester there were changes in curriculum and teachers. It made it very difficult on us as students. I felt like a test subject. The program has been around long enough that all the kinks should have been worked out long ago.

By contrast it appears that concerns about faculty quality/investment in students are stronger among the *non-transfer* graduates. For example:

While some professors were genuinely interested in the students and I feel taught excellently and encouraged learning, others did not. The faculty is very smart but I felt at times they were not the best suited for actually teaching the materials. I also do not encourage people to get three degrees at once, while it was rewarding, it was also a lot of hard work.

Thus, the comments reveal a potential problem with administration and procedures among transfer graduates and quality of instruction among non-transfer graduates.

¹ Transfer students defined as those who previously attended another higher education institution (Pyramid cohort codes of BACHXFER and ASSOCXFER). Graduates who had obtained dual enrollment credit or Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate transfer credits are included in the non-transfer category.

Boise State

Similar patterns can be observed among the two groups when asked whether they would recommend Boise State to others (or not). Statistically, the groups were practically identical in their positive assessment of the campus, on average ($M = 3.31, p = .964$).

Despite this similarity, it is instructive to look at those graduates in these groups who chose to elaborate on their rating in an open-ended question.

Among *undergraduate transfer students* (Table 4), 145 chose to comment on their quantitative rating as to whether s/he would recommend others to attend Boise State. Forty-two percent (61) of the comments made a decidedly affirmative statement that s/he would recommend the campus for whatever reason. In fact, over half of *those* graduates made very broad statements of enthusiasm or cited multiple reasons for their support (e.g., support from faculty, great staff, etc.).

Of the more specific reasons cited for approving of Boise State, the most numerous were those discussing helpfulness of faculty and the quality of the general learning environment or their specific program of study. As several graduates put it:

I feel like most of the teachers are approachable and genuinely interested in their students. I understand that with big lecture classes it is a bit more difficult, but nonetheless they are willing to work and compromise with their students.

The staff was great for the most part. They were passionate about their classes and really dedicated to help you understand your classwork in order for you to succeed in their class and life.

The program is well established, courses are pertinent to my professional growth and easy to access in a flexible timeframe.

On the other side of the coin, no single problem particularly dominated among the decidedly negative comments. Most numerous were concerns regarding the learning environment, cost, and administrative policies and priorities. Commentary regarding the learning environment was somewhat fragmented, but the one undercurrent is the general quality of the learning opportunities, especially in terms of how faculty manage curricula. For example:

Boise State seems to have lowered the expectations of their degree in a way that made me feel I wasn't getting my money's worth out of the education. The [] program was fantastic with the amount of support and genuine care from advisors (tanks [redacted]!!), but professors in my minors ([]) are providing a study guide for tests that specifically highlights exactly what will be on tests, which dampens critical thinking and due diligence. Even this dumbing down of curriculum wasn't sufficient because some professors even changed to open note tests after students complained mid-semester. I feel that an education should challenge the student and I actually walked away from this experience feeling like I achieved a watered down bachelor's degree. It seems like BSU has made educating students a lower priority than allowing under achieving students fail to ensure maximized enrollment numbers to improve their bottom line. Ultimately, the [] program was a great change for me, but BSU was the wrong university. I would expect this coursework from a junior college, not a nationally recognized university.

Cost was also discussed by students as an issue:

I disagree with higher education running campus like a business. I feel that my path to graduation was muddled with unnecessary changes that required me to take more classes, spend more money, and limited on options. I feel that the university steers students towards spending more of their own money, instead of providing a sound path to cost efficiency.

Similarly, administrative priorities were discussed, as in the case of this graduate:

It is very clear that the priority of this institution is their athletics departments head and shoulder over the academic departments, especially the humanities. BSU participates on a smaller scale in the growing national devaluing of humanities programs in favor of STEM departments. Boise State has, in it's [] department, some of the finest instructors I have ever had the privilege to learn from. Pity that they are kept from shining so we can pay our coaches more instead.

In sum, then, thirty-three comments (23%) among these graduates were decidedly negative in tone across various areas.

Among the *non-transfer undergraduates*, 220 chose to respond to this question. As seen in Table 4, a sizeable number of these graduates also had broadly positive things to say about Boise State, though this was a smaller proportion than was the case among transfer undergraduates. The learning environment was a concern with this group, with many of those comments focused on the quality of the graduates' major program and curriculum. For example:

There were a lot of courses that had nothing to do with what I was interested in. VERY LITTLE HANDS ON EXPERIENCE.

The [] program has too many changes and instructors are being thrust into classes they have never taught and instead of truly teaching they are often more concerned that hours are filled with busy work. More focus needs to be on skills.

I have found that better educational opportunities could have been found elsewhere. I have been greatly disturbed by useless courses that were required for graduation (especially the UF courses) that proved to be an absolute waste of my time, money, and effort. There is also far too much emphasis put on literature in the World Languages department, and no diversity of education. Had I not been so close to graduation, I would have transferred to another school to complete my studies.

In sum, non-transfer undergraduates appear to have learning environment concerns that are somewhat distinct from their transfer peers.

Hedging on Boise State

Among the *transfer students*, 41 comments were classified as **mixed bag**. What lessons can be gleaned from those who “hedge” their opinion of Boise State? Within this set, a sizable number (12) simply expressed variations on the idea that Boise State (or college education in general) depends on the needs, interests, or personal motivations of a student her/himself. An additional seven comments focused more on considering prospective programs, departments or professors. In many of these cases, these would not qualify as criticisms of the campus. For example:

I've liked BSU and I think it's a good school but everyone has different needs and different goals. So having said that, I would recommend BSU to a lot of people but not absolutely everyone. It just depends on what they're looking for.

One intriguing pattern is that a sizable number of transfer students were actually quite satisfied with their professors/instructors, but had problems with other elements of campus ranging from one's academic program, administrative units, fellow students, to the campus overall:

The faculty at BSU was the only redeeming aspect of my education. The administrative issues and seemingly random holds and policies were maddening and extremely discouraging.

Overall teachers and classes were good, the advising department could maybe be a little more helpful I found it difficult to get a hold of them and when I did finally get an appointment I didn't leave feeling it was really all that helpful. I only needed 19 credits to graduate and took 21 because I did not know workshops would have been an option it would have been nice if my advisor would have mentioned that when we discussed what I needed for my last semester. All and all good value on a decent education.

In responding to a separate open question regarding the process of transferring credits, graduates who had previously attended another institution expressed concern about procedural problems. A number of them noted credits had not transferred correctly or completely, resulting in repetition of courses they felt they had successfully completed elsewhere. As a result, delays in graduation were a common complaint:

Many of my credits were either not applicable (not needed for my gen-ed requirements according to Boise State's curriculum) or were not taken due to either a problem transferring from a term-based university to a semester-based university, or various departments such as English and Anthropology would not accept my credit transfers, which caused me to take some of the

same courses I had taken at a previous university again.

Communication regarding the transfer process was not directly commented by as many graduates, but of the 18 comments that specifically addressed this area, 15 were negative. A vast number of these focused on the problem of advising or receiving efficient help from various campus units:

Had difficulty trying to get an understanding from advisors and peer advising on how things worked credit-wise to graduate. Transferring credits from a junior college is a very messy process. I had an excess amount of credits to transfer. I had completed all of the necessary lower level courses upon transferring.

Extremely difficult and time consuming. Had to ask multiple times before some classes were considered for credits at Boise State. When I would speak to someone about a class that didn't transfer, I would often be transferred to 4 or 5 different people on the phone, or be asked to walk to different sides of campus to retrieve information. Overall the process was very inefficient.

In sum, transfer students who graduate generally like their faculty and feel that they are learning from them. But service-oriented aspects of campus continue to frustrate them, be it administrative priorities/procedures, advising, or transfer of credits.

Among *non-transfer graduates*, a slightly smaller percentage of comments fell into the “mixed bag” category. The structure of these comments appears more fragmented and relatively more diffuse compared to the “mixed” comments of the transfer students. There are some patterns:

These graduates expressed concerns about the general learning environment even while praising other campus experiences. For example:

Overall a great college experience- minus the politics of the [] program

It's cheap, and you get what you pay for. However, if someone can afford it, I would recommend going to a university that emphasizes academic rigor.

While BSU offered great classes once I was further in my degree, the general classes offered were taught by professors who often were not suited for the job. I felt like I was being cheated out of money - spending so much on inadequate faculty. Often time I felt frustrated and like I made the wrong decision in pursuing a degree at Boise State because of how the first two years at the university were way below my expectations. Some professors didn't know the material they were covering well enough to teach it to others and some professors were lazy and didn't provide an adequate learning experience.

Several additional graduates hedged their BSU experience by pointing out problems with advising, especially earlier in their academic career (these are in addition to 10 comments that focused on exclusively on this problem). For example:

I had some difficulty with advisement at the beginning of my undergraduate at Boise State, which changed towards the end and is now a major reason why I'm graduating this semester. But do the lack of advising during my first 4 years it was difficult for me to get into classes and finish in the four years that everyone hopes to finish in.

I say go, it's a good experience and its safe. However, the course guidance should be more educated on the subjects they are advising for. Also, I never had an advisor for the whole time I was at BSU, so I kind of went through a blind experience.

Overall, the “mixed” bag comments show a substantial amount of diffuse support among all undergraduates for Boise State that could possibly be strengthened by ensuring quality instruction (learning) and better formal and *informal* (personal) advising during the first two years of study.

Summary and Conclusion

Results indicate graduates are generally pleased with their majors and Boise State experience. Graduate students were generally more satisfied compared to undergraduates despite a drop in graduate advising and involvement with faculty research. Education graduates were the most satisfied at both levels of study. While transfer and non-transfer students as a whole were not statistically divergent in terms of their support for their majors/programs and Boise State, those who chose to use open-ended questions to vent frustrations or hedge their bets did diverge: Transfer graduates experienced procedural and administrative problems, while some non-transfer graduates focused on perceived lack of quality in instruction and curricula.

Table 4. Transfer and non-transfer undergraduate codes – elaborating on recommending Boise State (or not)

<i>Transfer undergraduates</i>																			
Broadly		Faculty		Learning environment		Cost		Mixed bag	Administration		Other	Classes		Physical campus		Location		Welcoming	
+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-		+	-		+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
38	4	9	4	5	8	3	6	41	2	7	5	2	2	0	1	2	0	3	1
<i>Non-transfer undergraduates</i>																			
Broadly		Faculty		Learning environment		Cost		Mixed bag	Administration		Other	Classes		Physical campus		Location		Welcoming	
+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-		+	-		+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
50	6	8	4	7	12	7	9	52	1	12	8	6	3	1	2	3	1	1	4
Advising																			
+	-																		
0	10																		

Note. Each comment is coded in only one category.

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 Prepared by: David Weaver, Ph.D.
 Office of Institutional Research

