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**Survey Of Older Than Average Students
At The University Of Washington**

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SURVEY OF OLDER THAN AVERAGE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Executive Summary

In spring of 1990, the Office of Educational Assessment conducted a survey of older than average students regarding their educational experiences at the University of Washington. The survey was approved in principal and jointly funded by the Associated Students of the University of Washington, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate, and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.

Questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of 556 undergraduate students who were at least 27 years of age (older than 84% of the general undergraduate population), and 460 graduate and professional students who were at least 30 years of age (older than 52% of the general graduate and professional student population). Completed questionnaires were returned by 246 undergraduates (44%) and 314 graduate students (68%). Responses to a survey of 3500 randomly selected undergraduate students conducted during spring quarter, 1988¹, provided baseline data for some items on the questionnaire.

In general, the picture of older than average students suggested by the survey is one of greater independence and diversity than the general population. They are more varied in their educational preparation and goals, their general life experiences, and in their commitment to activities and interests outside the university. They carry heavier burdens in terms of finances, and in terms of maintaining stable relationships with a partner and children. More than half of the respondents were married, and about 40% had at least one child. These rates were five times as high as among the previously surveyed undergraduate group. Higher percentages of older students worked more than 20 hours per week, and expected to be significantly in debt upon graduation. Enrollment at the University was career-related for a large number of older students, and most were returning to school after a break in enrollment averaging slightly more than seven-and-one-half years.

By and large, older than average students appeared to be satisfied with their educational experiences at the University, and most older students rated the faculty as good, very good, or excellent. Respondents did not feel that they had experienced age discrimination by individuals, but many felt that the system itself was discriminatory, that is, it was geared to the needs of traditional students.

The special needs of older than average students derive from the diversity of their backgrounds and current involvements. Many have full-time jobs and can most conveniently come to campus for classes, meetings, and administrative paperwork in the evenings. Others can arrange their schedules around one or two day-time trips to campus each week, but can't make an every-day commitment. For some, full-time enrollment is impossible, yet their program may not accommodate the part-time student due to inflexibility in the quarter-to-quarter and year-to-year scheduling of classes. The way programs and campus resources are structured would seem to stand as a greater roadblock to the integration of the older student into the university community than do the attitudes and perceptions of individual students, faculty and administrators. The challenge facing the university is not only to accommodate the diverse needs of the older than average student but to embrace them as providing a source of enrichment for all members of the academic community.

1. Gerald M. Gillmore, Quality of Undergraduate Student Life: A Survey, Educational Assessment Center, University of Washington, October, 1988.

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Introduction

OTAS (Older Than Average Students) is a student group at the University of Washington interested in identifying and meeting the special needs of older students. In spring of 1990, OTAS requested that the Office of Educational Assessment conduct a survey to obtain a description of the educational experiences of such students at the University of Washington. The survey was approved in principal and jointly funded by the Associated Students of the University of Washington (ASUW), the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS), and the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. This report summarizes responses to the survey and provides demographic information, and student evaluations of university academic and support programs.

Procedures

A sample of 1016 older than average students was randomly selected from students enrolled at the University of Washington at the beginning of spring quarter, 1990. Included in the study were 556 undergraduate students who were born in 1962 or earlier (at least 27 or 28 years of age), and 460 graduate students, born in 1959 or earlier (at least 30 or 31 years of age).

Questionnaires and an accompanying cover letter were sent to all students on April 20, 1990. Samples of each are included as Appendices A and B, respectively. Completed questionnaires were returned by 246 undergraduates (44.2%) and 314 graduate students (68.3%).

For some items, comparison statistics were available from a larger survey on the "Quality of Undergraduate Student Life" conducted during spring quarter, 1988¹. This survey polled 3500 randomly selected undergraduate students on their experiences at the University of Washington and provided an informal baseline against which responses from older-than-average students could be compared. Where data were available, they were incorporated in tables under a separate column labeled "QSL" for quality of student life.

Results

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Students were randomly selected for inclusion in the study subject to minimum age levels. Undergraduates were considered to be older than average if they were at least 27 years of age. For graduate students, the cutoff was 30 years of age. Tables 1 and 2 show that the percentages of undergraduate and graduate students who returned questionnaires corresponded closely to the percentages in the sample for all age ranges, indicating that the group who returned questionnaires was representative of the sample with respect to age. Approximately one-fifth of the undergraduates were between 27 and 30, slightly less than half were between 30 and 35, and one-fifth were between 36 and 40. Slightly more than half of the graduate students were between 30 and 35, with declining percentages in the higher age ranges.

1. Gerald M. Gillmore, Quality of Undergraduate Student Life: A Survey, Educational Assessment Center, University of Washington, October, 1988.