

Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) & National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE):

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I. Introduction

In spring 2003, George Mason faculty were invited to participate in the pilot of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), a web survey designed to complement the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). A report on the 2003 NSSE benchmark scores is available at <http://assessment.gmu.edu>. A paper report with peer comparisons is available by contacting the Office of Institutional Assessment at assessment@gmu.edu.

For obvious reasons, the questions asked of faculty on the FSSE are not exactly the same as those asked of students on the NSSE. For example, students are asked how often they have asked questions in class while faculty are asked what percent of students frequently ask questions in class. Thus, the comparisons are not always exact. Nonetheless, some questions are parallel between the two surveys and lend themselves more easily to comparisons. In all cases, however, the questions and responses provide insights into the often different perspectives of faculty and students.

On many FSSE questions, faculty are asked to think of a specific undergraduate course. They are also asked to identify whether the course has mostly first-year students and sophomores (lower division) or mostly juniors and seniors (upper division). The average class size of the selected Mason course is 44; the modal size is 20-29; and class size ranges from fewer than 10 to 200 or more. The average number of times each instructor has taught this course is 5 and ranges from “never” to more than 9.

II. Method and Respondent Characteristics

All full-time and part-time instructional faculty in departments/colleges with undergraduate programs were contacted by letter, along with two follow-up emails. Of the 1,231 faculty contacted, 316 responded for a response rate of 26%. As Appendix One shows, the faculty who responded are far more likely to be full-time than part-time (75% vs. 25%); whereas the actual percentage of part-time instructional faculty is 42%. The respondents are more likely to hold an academic rank of “assistant professor” or higher and are somewhat older than those not responding. The percentage indicating they are international is three times the percent of international instructional faculty at Mason as a whole (12% vs. 4%.) A detailed comparison of the characteristics of FSSE respondents and all undergraduate instructional faculty at Mason is available on line at <http://assessment.gmu.edu/results/index.shtml>.

In terms of ethnicity, FSSE uses different categories than the university; therefore, it is hard to compare respondents to non-respondents. For example, 7% of respondents say they are multi-racial, but university data do not capture that characteristic. Eighty-two percent of the respondents are Caucasian/White, followed by Asian (4%) and Black (3%). Of all the respondents, 29% are in the fields of “arts and humanities,” followed by 15% who are in “social sciences” and 11% who are in “business.”

III. Highlights

Due to the low response rate on the FSSE, the results reported here must be interpreted with great caution. Further, the survey respondents are not characteristic of all undergraduate instructional faculty on several levels, including full/part-time status and rank. Nonetheless, 316 faculty did respond to the FSSE and it is worthwhile to view their perceptions of the university, the classroom and interaction with students.

For the most part, the respondents are full-time faculty—people who are likely to be at the university for a while and have greater influence over policy than part-time, non-tenured faculty. Their perceptions of what is important and not important are instructive. For example, while these faculty value practica, internships and field experiences, lower division faculty, in particular, are less enthusiastic about community service and learning communities, places where these practices often, although not exclusively, take place. Nor is undergraduate research with faculty considered highly important by these respondents. A culminating senior experience, on the other hand, receives support from half of the faculty respondents. These results suggest that support for some innovative educational experiences may be limited among faculty.

Approximately nine out of ten faculty believe that George Mason emphasizes critical thinking and learning on one's own. Results from the Graduating Senior Survey indicate that seniors are in concurrence with the emphasis on critical thinking. It is not easy to understand whether "learning on one's own" refers to the idea of developing lifelong learning skills, taking responsibility for one's own learning, being unwilling to take extra measures to help students learn, or something else.

It is particularly instructive to see faculty self-reports of use of time. As might be expected, faculty spend much of their time teaching, grading, providing feedback, preparing for class and reflecting on class activities. A small proportion of faculty spend a considerable amount of time on interactions outside the classroom, working with students on non-course activities, supervising internships and working with students on research. Nearly one third of lower division faculty, many of whom are part-time, do not advise students.

On some questions, faculty who responded to the survey were asked to think in terms of ONE selected undergraduate course, hence the designation in this report of upper division (UD) and lower division (LD) faculty. In a typical week, nearly one-fourth of lower division faculty give no homework assignments that take more than one hour to complete. Faculty were asked how they distribute time in the classroom and were given four possible choices ranging from "less than 10%" to "50-75% or more of class time." Nearly half of lower division faculty spend over half of their time lecturing, whereas 82% of upper division faculty are distributed fairly evenly among the top three choices, ranging from 10-29% to 50-75% or more of class time.

- *In reading this report, it is very important to keep in mind that the faculty responding to this survey are both predominantly full-time and disproportionately full-time. Among all undergraduate instructional faculty, 58% are full-time, but among respondents, 75% are full-time. If a representative sample of part-time faculty had completed the survey, the responses might have been different.*
- *It is also important to remember that, for most questions, faculty are responding in terms of ONE selected undergraduate course they are teaching or have taught during the current academic year and students are responding to a group of courses they have taken or are taking during the current school year.*

IV. Results

This section compares faculty's responses with student responses when it is appropriate. There are some interesting and noteworthy differences and similarities. *Please note the use of "LD" to indicate lower division courses and "UD" to indicate upper division courses, and the use of "FY" to indicate first-year students and "SR" for senior students. All comparisons are made with faculty referring to one select course and students referring to the 2002-03 school year.*

1. Academic and Intellectual Experiences

For details, please refer to *Appendix Two, Table 1-1*.

- Faculty who teach lower-division courses are more likely to report that more than 50% of their students "frequently" come to class without completing readings or assignments than faculty who teach upper-division

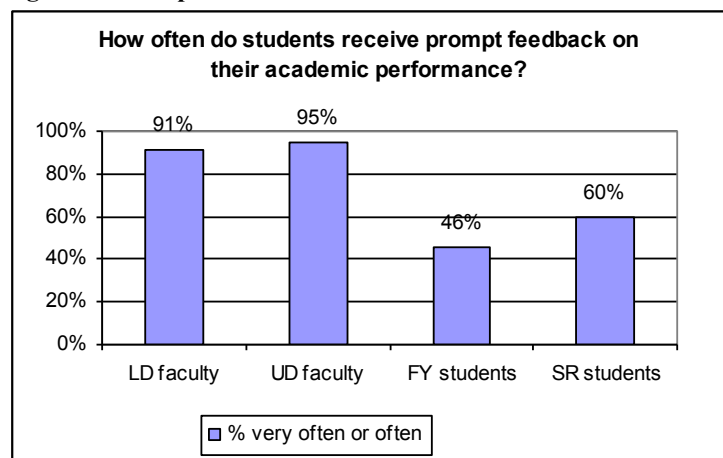
courses (36% vs. 27%). In contrast, 20% of first-year students and 17% of seniors admit they “often” or “very often” come to class without completing readings or assignments.

- Approximately 29% of LD faculty and 49% of UD faculty report that over 50% of their students “occasionally” use email to communicate with them. However, 83% of first-year students and 88% of seniors say they “often” or “very often” use email to communicate with an instructor.
- Eleven percent of LD faculty and 8% of UD faculty say that NO students in their courses discuss ideas from readings or classes with them outside of class. Fifty percent of freshmen and 36% of seniors say they have “NEVER” done so.

The following highlights are from *Appendix Two, Table 1-2*.

- Faculty (42% LD and 47% UD) are much less likely to say that students have class discussions or writing assignments that include diverse perspectives “often” or “very often” than students. Only small percentages of students say this “never” happens, but between 25% (UD) and 38% (LD) of faculty say this never happens in their course.
- Faculty underestimate how often students use an electronic medium to discuss or complete an assignment. Thirty-five percent of LD faculty and 58% of UD faculty say this happens “very often” or “often” in their select courses, while 60% of freshmen and 67% of seniors say they do this “very often” or “often.”
- There is a large discrepancy between student and faculty perceptions of how often prompt feedback occurs. Nearly all faculty (91% of LD and 95% of UD) feel this happens “very often” or “often” in their select courses. Students, on the other hand, feel this happens less frequently—46% of freshmen and 60% of seniors say this.

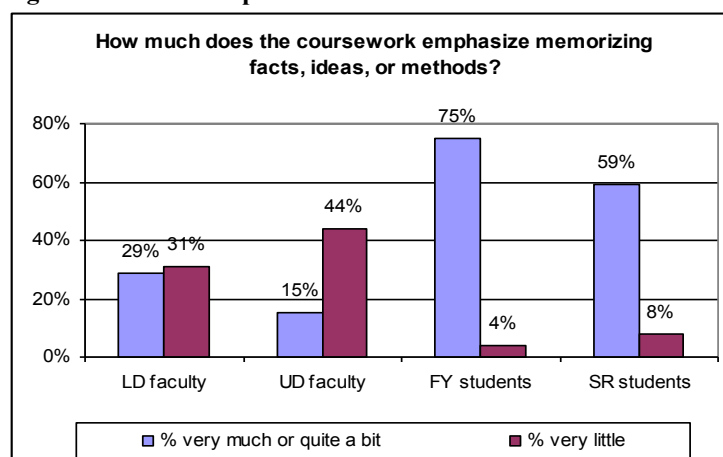
Figure 1: Prompt Feedback on Academic Performance



The following highlights are from *Appendix Two, Table 1-3*.

- For their select courses, 58% of LD faculty do NOT think it is important for their students to prepare two or more drafts of a paper or an assignment before turning it in, while 52% of freshmen “very often” or “often” do so. In greater contrast, 24% of UD faculty do NOT think it is important but 56% of seniors “very often” or “often” do so.
- More UD faculty think it is “very important” or “important” to them that their students work on a paper or project that requires integrating ideas or information from various sources than LD faculty (83% vs. 49%). By contrast, 74% of freshmen and 87% of seniors report “very often” or “often” engaging in this behavior.
- Between 55% and 56% of faculty do NOT think it is important for them that their students tutor or teach other students. About the same percentage of students (59% of freshmen and 56% of seniors) have never done this.

Figure 2: Course Emphasis on Memorization



2. Emphasis on Coursework

The following highlights are based on *Appendix Two, Table 2*.

- Although faculty and students differ somewhat in their perceptions of what is emphasized in their coursework, their views of how much emphasis is placed on memorizing facts are substantially different. Seventy-five percent of freshmen think their coursework emphasizes memorization “very much” or “quite a bit”, but only 29% of LD faculty think so. Most seniors (59%) share the same perception as freshmen, but only 15% of UD faculty think so.

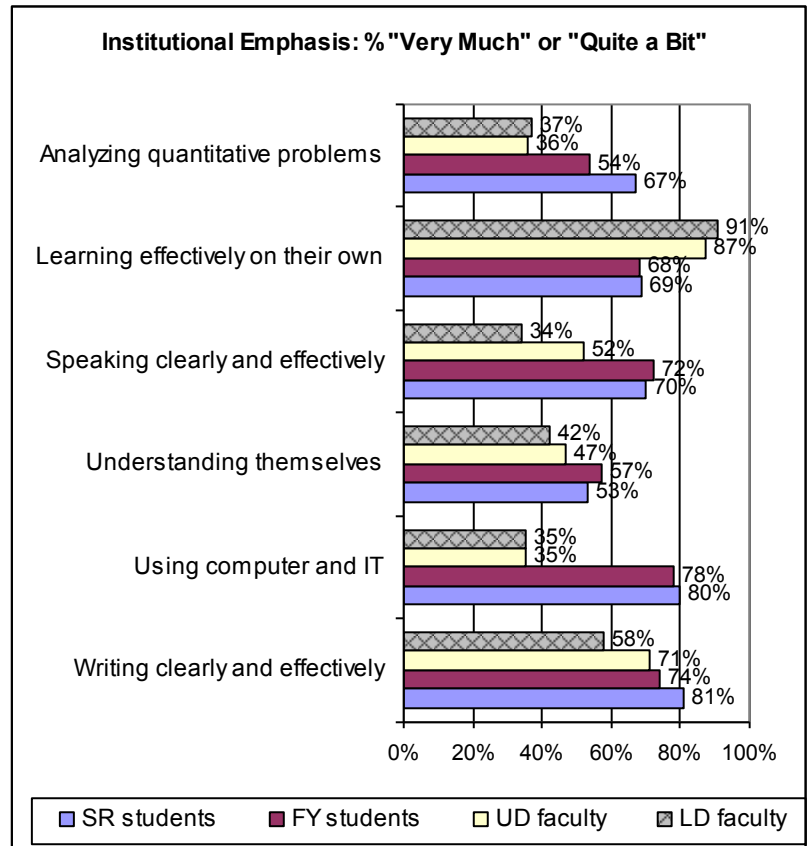
- Generally, more UD faculty than LD faculty think they place “very much” or “quite a bit” of emphasis on analysis, synthesis, making judgments and application in their coursework.
- Most UD faculty (86%) think they place “very much” or “quite a bit” of emphasis on synthesis, but fewer seniors think so (75%).

3. Educational and Personal Growth

For detailed information, please refer to *Appendix Two, Table 3*.

- Faculty and students share some perceptions of what it is that George Mason, as an institution, emphasizes. For example, 42% of LD faculty and 67% of UD faculty, compared to 49% of freshmen and 65% of seniors, share the perception that Mason “very much” or “quite a bit” emphasizes acquiring a job or work-related knowledge and skills.
- Similarly, the overwhelming majority of both faculty (90% LD, 94% UD) and students (84% of both freshmen and seniors) think that Mason “very much” or “quite a bit” emphasizes thinking critically and analytically.
- There are wide differences in perspective between faculty and students regarding other perceived Mason emphases. For example, not nearly as many faculty (34% LD, 52% UD) think that Mason emphasizes speaking clearly and effectively as students (72% of freshmen, 70% of seniors.)
- Students (54% of freshmen, 67% of seniors) also think that Mason emphasizes analyzing quantitative problems to a much greater extent than faculty (37% LD, 36% UD).
- Faculty may have underestimated Mason’s emphasis on using computing and information technology: only 35% of all faculty think the emphasis is “very much” or “quite a bit,” while 42% of LD faculty and 27% of UD faculty think the emphasis is “very little.” In contrast, 78% of freshmen and 80% of senior see the emphasis as “very much” or “quite a bit.”
- Students (65% of freshmen, 58% of seniors) are far more likely to see Mason emphasizing understanding of people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds than faculty (38% LD, 46% UD).
- Faculty (91% LD, 87% UD) are far more likely to see Mason emphasizing learning effectively on their own than students (68% of freshmen, 69% of seniors).

Figure 3. Perceived Institutional Emphasis



4. Enriching Educational Experiences

For detailed information, please refer to *Appendix Two, Table 4*.

- Participation in a learning community is considered “very important” or “important” to only 25% of LD faculty, but 39% of freshmen have already been in or plan to be in a learning community. Forty percent of UD faculty think learning communities are “very important” or “important,” while only 16% of seniors have participated or plan to.
- Community service work shows a similar discrepancy in terms of importance between LD faculty (35%) and freshmen (71%).

- There is a division among faculty regarding the value of foreign language coursework. Forty-one percent of LD faculty and 37% of UD faculty think it is “very important” or “important” for undergraduates to study a foreign language, while 36% of LD faculty and 32% of UD faculty think this is “not important.”
- A similar division exists regarding study abroad. Over one-third of LD faculty (36%) feel study abroad is “very important” or “important” and another third of LD faculty (34%) feel it is “not important.” For UD faculty, 46% think it is “very important” or “important” and 22% think it is “not important.” Over one-third of freshmen and 14% of seniors plan to study abroad or have studies abroad.
- While a majority of faculty think it is “very important” or “important” that students have a culminating senior experience (50% of LD faculty and 61% of UD faculty), 26% of LD faculty and 10% of UD faculty feel this is “not important.”

5. Quality of Relationships

As shown in *Appendix Two, Table 5*:

- When asked about the quality of student relationships with other students, with faculty and with administrators, faculty fairly closely mirrored the responses of students with regard to administrators and faculty. However, with regard to other students, faculty were far less likely to see the quality of student relationships as “friendly, supportive, sense of belonging” than students themselves. For example, 38% of faculty overall picked a “6” or “7” with 7 being the most friendly and supportive, while 60% of freshmen and 55% of seniors made this same choice.

6. Institutional Environment

For detailed information, please refer to *Appendix Two, Table 6*.

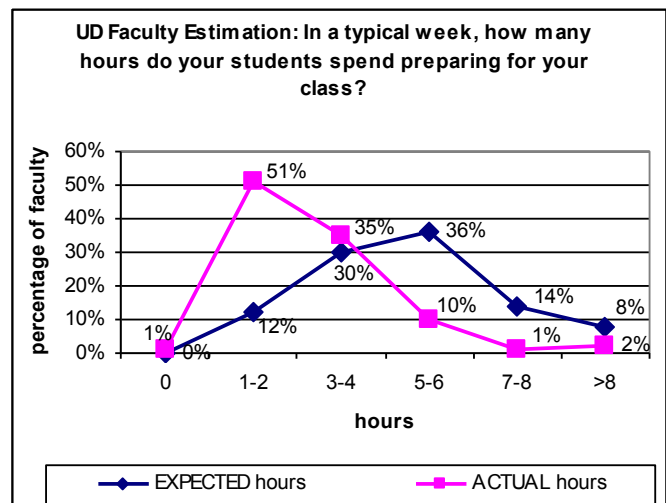
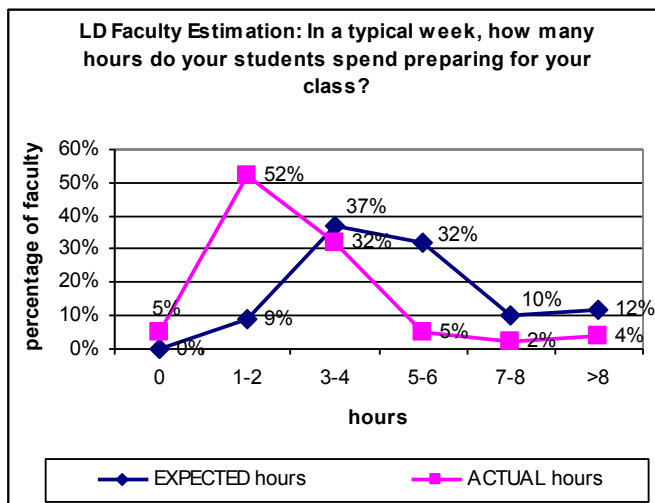
- There are several overlapping perceptions of George Mason held by faculty and students. For example, approximately two-thirds of each of the four groups feel that Mason provides students with academic support.
- A relatively lower percentage of faculty (25% LD and 30% UD) and students (36% freshmen and 19% seniors) think that Mason provides students the support they need to thrive socially “very much” or “quite a bit.”
- Students (74% freshmen and 76% seniors), not surprisingly, are far more likely to feel that Mason requires them to spend significant amounts of time studying than do faculty (51% LD and 60% UD.)

7. Use of Time

For more information, please see *Appendix Two, Table 7*.

- Faculty have expectations regarding student study and preparation time that differ considerably from what faculty think actually happens. The modal category for expected hours of study for LD and UD faculty is 3-4 hours and 5-6 hours respectively. The modal category for both LD and UD faculty in terms of the amount of study they think actually happens is 1-2 hours (as shown in Figure 4 and 5).

Figures 4 & 5. Expected and Actual Hours Spent Preparing for Class



- As shown in Table 1, most faculty do NOT assign written papers of more than 10 pages in their select courses—89% of LD faculty and 63% of UD faculty.
- As shown in Table 2, nearly half of LD faculty (48%) spend at least 50% of class time lecturing; 29% of UD faculty do so.

Table 1. Reading, Writing and Homework Assignments Given by Faculty in a Selected Undergraduate Course

	Course Level	None	1	2 or More
# of assigned textbooks, books, book-length packs of readings	LD	1%	38%	61%
	UD	5%	45%	49%
# of written papers of more than 10 pages	LD	89%	7%	5%
	UD	63%	25%	13%
# of written papers between 5 and 10 pages	LD	68%	16%	17%
	UD	40%	33%	27%
# of written papers of fewer than 5 pages	LD	37%	15%	48%
	UD	36%	13%	51%
In a typical week, # of homework assignments that take your students more than one hour to complete	LD	23%	49%	28%
	UD	12%	60%	27%
In a typical week, # of homework assignments that take your students less than one hour to complete	LD	57%	29%	15%
	UD	44%	39%	17%

Table 2. On Average, the Percent of Class Time Faculty Spent on the Following (in selected undergraduate courses):

	Course Level	Less than 10% of class time	10-29% of class time	30-49% of class time	50-75% or more of class time
Lecture	LD	15%	16%	20%	48%
	UD	17%	27%	26%	29%
Teacher-Led Discussion	LD	31%	42%	16%	10%
	UD	27%	45%	27%	11%
Teacher-Student Shared Responsibility (seminar, discussion, etc.)	LD	67%	20%	11%	3%
	UD	54%	24%	14%	8%
Computer Mediated Activities	LD	86%	9%	3%	3%
	UD	77%	15%	5%	3%
Small Group Activities	LD	71%	21%	6%	3%
	UD	55%	34%	9%	2%
Student Presentations	LD	87%	6%	6%	2%
	UD	62%	28%	8%	2%
In-Class Writing	LD	87%	12%	0	1%
	UD	85%	13%	1%	1%
Performances in Applied/Fine Arts (dance, drama, music)	LD	93%	5%	0	2%
	UD	96%	2%	1%	2%
Experiential (labs, field work, etc.)	LD	71%	17%	7%	7%
	UD	78%	12%	4%	4%

This In Focus and earlier editions of this publication can be found at our website, <http://assessment.gmu.edu>

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