

IMAGE AND POSITIONING MARKET RESEARCH

Student Satisfaction Inventory: Marketing Research Summary

*California State University, Stanislaus
Turlock, California*

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Introduction

The Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) was conducted by California State University, Stanislaus (CSU Stanislaus) in May/June of 2008. Often the SSI is used by colleges to prioritize areas of improvement for retention initiatives. The SSI also provides solid information on strengths as experienced by students.

We regularly incorporate the SSI in marketing research for two reasons:

1. Current students can tell us what the institution is doing well, providing a solid foundation for marketing messages. Strong ratings on specific aspects of the educational product allow us to market with confidence. We know that the university can deliver on what is promised.
2. Current students also can reveal product areas needing work. We may discover critical product elements that are functioning below standard and need to be addressed before they can be marketed. It is unwise to “sell” product areas that are deficient, simply because research shows they are desirable to students. That kind of strategy ultimately leads to retention and credibility issues.

The SSI is a normed instrument whose purpose is to measure student satisfaction on a range of college experiences. The SSI complements focus group work, because it confirms both strengths and priorities for change. The SSI provides the larger, overall experience of students on campus and the focus groups fill in specific details, comments, and anecdotes.

The SSI calculates “satisfaction” based upon the disparity between importance to students of a set of programs and services and how well those programs and services are meeting students’ expectations. Thus, there are three scores for each of the inventory items: an importance score, designed to measure the strength of a student’s expectations; a satisfaction score, designed to measure the student’s actual experience on campus; and a performance gap score – the discrepancy between the importance and satisfaction scores. By examining these “performance gaps,” it is possible to put student satisfaction within the context of expectations.

In the tables on the next few pages, we have summarized data that depict the importance, satisfaction, and performance gap scores for CSU Stanislaus compared with national public four-year university norms on the same scales and items. The comparison group includes all students attending public four-year schools who have participated in the Student Satisfaction Inventory for

approximately the last three years. Where applicable we have noted in the text significant differences compared to CSU Stanislaus' 1997 administration of the instrument and a current subset of public, four-year schools in Western states including Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. To understand how the responses are scored please note the rating scales:

Importance		Satisfaction	
1	not important at all	1	extremely dissatisfied
2	not important	2	not satisfied
3	fairly unimportant	3	somewhat dissatisfied
4	neutral	4	neutral
5	somewhat important	5	somewhat important
6	important	6	satisfied
7	extremely important	7	extremely satisfied

The complete data reports with comparisons were sent to CSU Stanislaus electronically. This summary looks at the results from a marketing perspective. Following are sample demographics and key findings and results by topic.

Sample Demographics

The SSI was completed by 336 CSU Stanislaus students. Most respondents were full-time students (91%) attending classes during the day (84%). As might be expected 69 percent were female, 31 percent male. Many (79%) were age 24 or under and 21 percent age 25 or older. Most (84%) lived off campus. Additional demographics are in the chart below.

Class Level		Institutional Choice	
Freshman	19%	1st choice	62%
Sophomore	16%	2nd choice	24%
Junior	39%	3rd choice or lower	14%
Senior	20%		
Graduate/professional	5%	Employment	
Other class level	1%	Full-time	18%
		Part-time	59%
		Unemployed	23%
Current Class Load			
Full-time	91%		
Part-time	9%		
Disability			
Yes	3%		
No	97%		

Key Findings and Results by Topic

Overall, What Is Most Important to CSU Stanislaus Students?

All items on the SSI can be grouped under 11 general topics or “scales.” When we look at the rank order of the topics by students at CSU Stanislaus versus other students at four-year institutions, concern for the individual and student centeredness are more important for CSU Stanislaus students. It is helpful to look at the top five rank order in parentheses.

Scale Importance	CSU Stanislaus Importance/Rank	4 Year Comparison/ Rank
Safety and Security	6.46 (1)	6.30 (2)
Academic Advising	6.43 (2)	6.33 (1)
Instructional Effectiveness	6.38 (3)	6.32 (3)
Registration Effectiveness	6.29 (4)	6.20 (4)
Concern for the Individual	6.19 (5)	6.11 (6)
Student Centeredness	6.18 (6)	6.08
Recruitment and Financial Aid	6.17	6.13 (5)
Campus Climate	6.17	6.10
Campus Support Services	6.13	6.04
Service Excellence	6.11	6.01
Campus Life	5.68	5.70

For the most part, what are of highest importance to Stanislaus students is of high importance to their counterparts nationally, though in slightly different order. Safety and security is of top importance, ranking higher than the comparison group (6.46 vs. 6.30). Student centeredness is more important for Stanislaus students and recruitment and financial aid is of lesser importance.

What Does CSU Stanislaus Do Well?

SSI strengths

In order to identify the strong points of the CSU Stanislaus experience from a student's perspective, we looked at individual items which appeared as strengths (above the median in importance 6.23, upper quartile in satisfaction 5.25). Though these items are strengths, and generally the gaps between expectation and performance are smaller, there remains some room for continued improvement even on these items.

NOTE: The 4 YR column designates items for which satisfaction scores were significantly higher (+) or significantly lower (-) than those of the national four-year school comparison group. There are a few campus-specific items among the strengths. Because they are custom questions, national comparisons are not available.

Items are listed in order of IMPORTANCE.

Item #	Item	IMP	SAT	GAP	4 YR
8.	The content of the courses within my major is valuable.	6.64	5.47	1.17	
33.	My academic advisor is knowledgeable about requirements in my major.	6.63	5.38	1.25	
7.	The campus is safe and secure for all students.	6.58	5.74	0.84	+
68.	Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field.	6.57	5.57	1.00	
77.	Attending this college has prepared me for the next step, whether that is career or graduate school.	6.56	5.33	1.23	n/a
16.	The instruction in my major field is excellent.	6.54	5.38	1.16	
55.	Major requirements are clear and reasonable.	6.49	5.32	1.17	
65.	Faculty are usually available after class and during office hours.	6.47	5.51	0.96	
72.	On the whole, the campus is well-maintained.	6.40	5.82	0.58	+
39.	I am able to experience intellectual growth here.	6.38	5.41	0.97	
29.	It is an enjoyable experience to be a student on this campus.	6.36	5.37	0.99	
2.	The campus staff are caring and helpful.	6.32	5.27	1.05	
50.	Class change (drop/add) policies are reasonable.	6.32	5.25	1.07	
26.	Computer labs are adequate and accessible.	6.29	5.42	0.87	
51.	This institution has a good reputation within the community.	6.29	5.53	0.76	
45.	Students are made to feel welcome on this campus.	6.28	5.27	1.01	
15.	The staff in the health services area are competent.	6.23	5.59	0.64	+

CSU Stanislaus demonstrates some significant strength in terms of the educational product it delivers. For example, CSU Stanislaus students are pleased with the content of courses; instruction in their field; major requirements, which increased significantly in satisfaction from '97, 5.32; and their preparation for the next step (keeping in mind the size of this gap needs to be

watched). Overall, students believe they are experiencing intellectual growth and enjoy being a student at CSU Stanislaus. These strengths should be promoted heavily in marketing materials and on the Web.

Students appreciate that their faculty members are experts – “nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field,” and that they have industry experience and contacts. Faculty members also provide excellent instruction and are available to students (satisfaction increased from '97, 5.30 to 5.51).

Advisor knowledge of requirements is an important aspect for students to be able to finish as expected. The satisfaction level registers it as one of the school's strengths but it still has room for improvement as the gap is 1.25. Satisfaction in other advising areas was very low—see next section.

Students find the campus is well-maintained (higher than Western four-year rating 5.59; and the campus is safe (higher than the Western 4 year rating 5.46 and improved since '97, 5.49.)

A very positive theme emerges when we look for student perspectives on the service they receive. CSU Stanislaus excels as approachable and caring (higher than '97, 5.03); “students are made to feel welcome,” (also higher than '97, 5.03), and staff in health services are competent (higher than Western 4 year group, 5.11).

When students compare institutions especially during campus visits, “adequate computer labs” often comes up as an absolute necessity. CSU Stanislaus should make sure to mention their high rating/ranking in tour scripts.

It is also very positive that students believe Stanislaus has a good reputation in the community, which also rated significantly higher than the 1997 administration from 5.35 vs. 5.53.

Where Can CSU Stanislaus Improve?

SSI priorities for action

The items in this section should be priorities for improvement on campus because they most likely impact retention. Here are the items which appeared as weaknesses (above the median in importance 6.21, and performance gaps in the top quartile – 1.37 or greater).

NOTE: The 4YR column designates items where agreement scores were significantly higher (+) or significantly lower (-) than those of the national averages for other four-year, public universities.

Items are listed in order of IMPORTANCE.

Item #	Item	IMP	SAT	GAP	4 YR
34.	I am able to register for classes I need with few conflicts.	6.62	4.86	1.76	
81.	I understand what I need to do to complete everything for graduation.	6.61	5.11	1.50	n/a
82.	I will be able to finish my program in the amount of time anticipated.	6.61	5.09	1.52	n/a
66.	Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.	6.51	5.08	1.43	
25.	Faculty are fair and unbiased in their treatment of individual students.	6.50	4.90	1.60	-
69.	There is a good variety of courses provided on this campus.	6.49	4.95	1.54	-
36.	Security staff respond quickly in emergencies.	6.47	5.04	1.43	
83.	My program has provided opportunities for job or graduate school connections.	6.46	4.84	1.62	n/a
21.	The amount of student parking space on campus is adequate.	6.40	3.69	2.71	+
47.	Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress in a course.	6.38	4.77	1.61	-
59.	This institution shows concern for students as individuals.	6.35	4.98	1.37	
17.	Adequate financial aid is available for most students.	6.30	4.61	1.69	
19.	My academic advisor helps me set goals to work toward.	6.26	4.87	1.39	
49.	There are adequate services to help me decide upon a career.	6.25	4.88	1.37	
73.	Student activities fees are put to good use.	6.22	4.52	1.70	
53.	Faculty take into consideration student differences as they teach a course.	6.21	4.75	1.46	

Issues with graduation processes and graduating on time were heard in the focus groups with students on campus. The item regarding being able to register for classes did see significant improvement since '97, 4.57 vs. 4.86.

Custom item 83, regarding opportunities for job or grad school connections is of concern as this will be an important area for marketing and recruitment. Student comments in the focus groups were mixed. Some students felt there were many opportunities including internships, guest speakers, job listings posted. Others complained that they did not know about opportunities. Only a few students planning graduate school felt that they had enough networking support and opportunities to do research, for example.

“Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment” can indicate that Stanislaus students are unable to see how their investment will better their future opportunities. The university needs to “re-recruit” current students. It would be helpful to have an internal communications plan which regularly highlights recent graduate outcomes.

Sufficient options or course variety was a topic heard in focus groups, as some departments are small and students do not perceive enough variety. Some students are getting permission to take different courses that will qualify for their majors or participating in a few interdisciplinary courses, but these options may not be broadly known or encouraged.

Timely feedback and notification when students are doing poorly in a class are important areas of concern for students who are busy with work, family and other commitments. Faculty fairness and consideration of student differences may be related to coursework complaints, favoritism, or cultural insensitivity. Students and staff noted the lack of faculty mentors for non-white students. We suggest further exploration of these issues.

Parking is a common student’s complaint and CSU Stanislaus scored significantly higher in satisfaction than students at other four-year institutions. But with CSU Stanislaus’ large working and commuter populations, parking may be even a more critical issue than it is at other schools. CSU Stanislaus should explore this further to uncover when parking needs are beyond capacity and make plans for improvement.

Another theme in the chart above echoes focus group participants’ stated desire for better advising and exploration of career/program options. In focus groups, some students indicated that they were never given opportunities to explore career options, especially at the community college. They would like Stanislaus to offer more help of this type to entering students. We strongly recommend Stanislaus offer career exploration nights or classes/tracks during orientation or the first week of each semester and include this topic in any open houses for community college students. Though there is work to do, several of these items had improved since 1997:

- Concern for individual, up from 4.74 to 4.98
- Advisor helps me to set goals up from 4.50 to 4.87.
- Adequate services to help me decide on career up from 4.42 to 4.88

A few students in the focus groups complained that they were rushed to register, often getting bad advice when they arrived. One was told by an advisor that it did not matter if it took her five to six years to complete her degree. From these results and the focus group comments it appears students are looking for better advising prior to and when they first arrive, and as they prepare to graduate.

Activity fees are most likely a sore point for many commuter students who do not feel the fee should apply to them, but the satisfaction did increase from 1997 from 4.29 to 4.52.

Adequate financial aid is consistently of high importance and commonly an issue for work at public institutions, as you can see Stanislaus' satisfaction was not significantly different than that of the national group. Work has been done since 1997; satisfaction has increased significantly from 4.28 to 4.61, but we recommend continued vigilance. First generation students unfamiliar with the process may not be aware of what is available and working students may not take the time. Stanislaus should continue communication efforts including an easy, quick web estimator.

Factors in Decision to Enroll

When asked to rate factors according to their importance in the decision to enroll, CSU Stanislaus students' top five choices were somewhat different than choices of other four-year college students. Size played more of a factor and financial aid played less of a factor for Stanislaus students. This is not surprising considering the image of the institution and the focus group comments regarding how the campus is small and personable.

Factors in Enrollment versus Four-year Technical and Community Colleges

CSU Stanislaus Rank	Factor	Four-Year Rank
1	Cost	1
2	Academic reputation	3
3	Size	7
4	Personalized attention	5
5	Geographic setting	4
6	Campus appearance	6
7	Financial aid	2
8	Recommendation from family/friends	8
9	Opportunity to play sports	9

Summary of Overall Experience

When asked questions regarding their experience in its entirety, over half of CSU Stanislaus students indicate that overall they are satisfied (55% satisfied or very satisfied) and would enroll again (60% probably yes or definitely yes).

Note in the met expectations question the CSU Stanislaus mean was significantly higher than the four-year college comparison group, significantly higher than the Western group (4.54), and a better result than 1997 (4.53). CSU Stanislaus can and should promote that fact that the university scores higher in meeting students expectations.

NOTE: The 4 YR column designates items for which satisfaction scores were significantly higher (+) or significantly lower (-) than those of the averages for other four-year, public universities.

Institutional Experience Summary	CSU Stanislaus	4 YR
So far, how has your college experience met your expectations?	4.73	+
Rate your overall satisfaction with your experience here thus far.	5.31	
All in all, if you had to do it over, would you enroll here again?	5.41	
