

UW Student PULSE¹ Draft Report

Student Information Seeking

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¹ PULSE is an acronym for Polling University Life and the Student Experience.

Executive Summary

- This pilot project was a success in providing useful information within a short timeframe; data collection last 11 days and an initial report was available one week afterwards.
- Students took an average of 5 minutes to complete the survey. There were no reported data collection problems.
- Out of 1,500 randomly selected students, 568 completed this survey. An approximation of this survey's margin of error is +/- 4.1%.
- Academic concerns topped the list of important concerns; graduation requirements were rated most important.
- Graduate students' importance ratings were generally lower across the board, with once exception being the importance of computing resources. This topic generally increases in importance the longer one has been in school.
- Class standing affected importance ratings, most strongly for the "social scene," which was more important to freshmen and sophomores.
- Web and email were extremely popular sources of information, but a premium was put on brevity in emails and *finding* information on the web.
- Students prefer to seek information on academic activities from professors and teaching assistants.
- Health-related information is preferred from family and housing fellow or assistants.
- Extra-curricular activities were strongly associated with local, student-centered sources, such as student radio, newspapers, posters, and friends.
- The effect of television on these particular topics was ambiguous. This is perhaps because of its strength as an entertainment rather than an information source.
- Communicators on campus should take advantage, where appropriate, of "cross-marketing" student services. For example, students prefer to seek information from professors on career and advising, but may prefer email as the mode of communication, as much anecdotal evidence maintains. Likewise, the web can be used as a clearinghouse for phone numbers and contact information for general campus information as well as health concerns.
- The importance and quality of academic advising was stressed by students in this study. Not only was it rated as relatively important, but many students chose to speak out on the topic wen asked about improvements the UW could make in communicating to students.

Background

The UW Student PULSE is an initiative by the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs office to obtain quick survey data about various aspects of student life on campus. In particular, the current study examined how students prefer to seek information about a variety of topics. The results of this survey are intended to modify the communication strategies used by offices and departments who provide student services.

Methodology

A random sample of 1,500 UW-Madison undergraduate, graduate and special students was randomly selected from data supplied by the UW-Madison Registrar. The list was current as of the 10th day of classes, fall semester, 2002.

Nearly all students (99%) have an email address on record with the Registrar.

An email explaining the purpose of the research and signed by Chancellor Wiley was sent to all 1,500 individuals. Included in each email was the questionnaire's URL. Twenty-nine email addresses were undeliverable. While all web respondents received the same questionnaire, each individual was sent their own unique URL for connecting to the site. Respondents could finish the survey at their leisure; if a respondent stopped in the middle of the questionnaire, they could pick up where they left off by clicking on the URL contained in their email.

The initial email solicitation was sent on Monday, October 28, 2002. Three follow-up contacts were made with non-respondents within the next two weeks and data were collected until Thursday, November 7. The online survey garnered 568 completed questionnaires out of a non-redundant, cleaned sample of 1,471.² This corresponds to a 38.6% response rate, which, incidentally, is the same response rate the 2002 Student Computing Survey obtained in February. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 4.1%.

The distribution of respondents' class standing was compared with the UW's actual class standing. A weight which took into account any disparity between the two distributions was computed and applied to the dataset. This weight makes the data presented here a more accurate representation of the actual student population.

Controlling for a handful of outliers, it took respondents an average 5 minutes (median = 4 minutes) to complete the survey.

² Four individuals answered most of the questions but did not complete it. These individuals are included in the analysis, but they are not included in the computation of response rate.

Notes on Data Analysis

All relevant lists of response options were randomized so that order effects could be controlled.

The number of respondents upon which percentages are calculated can change from question to question. Some respondents simply skip a question, others are instructed to skip a question. Because of this, the number of respondents is usually included in each Table in the Frequency Runs and Analysis section. Generally, the figures reported here take into account only those individuals who answered the question.

Means, medians and standard deviations are reported where appropriate. Means are arithmetic averages and measures of central tendency. A median delineates the exact middle of a distribution; half of respondents are located above this number and half below. It is included as an additional measure of central tendency when the mean might be misleading. Standard deviations are measures of dispersion or variability. Generally speaking, the smaller the standard deviation, the less the scores comprising a particular distribution vary from the mean. A pragmatic interpretation of the standard deviation is agreement; the larger the standard deviation within a scale, the more disagreement among the respondents.

In most of the following tables, items are presented in some rank order. This means that the most frequently cited response, highest mean, etc. are presented at the top of the table and other items follow sequentially.

In general, care should always be taken in interpreting data, keeping in mind the context and wording of the question, what response options, if any, respondents were asked to choose, etc. Where a specific response scale was used (such as a Likert scale, ranking, etc.) this information is highlighted in or at the end of the question.

Analysis

Q1. In your day-to-day life, how important is finding information on each of the following?

Of the 13 areas asked about, academic concerns received the highest ratings. As the table below shows, three of the top four areas are directly concerned with students' schooling. Considered less important were health issues and extra-curricular activities.

While finding news and information about extra-curricular activities was rated less important overall, the results were not uniform across class standing. Class standing had the largest effect in how important one rated the social scene, with freshmen and sophomores rating this topic much more important than juniors, seniors or graduate students did.

Note the ratings gap between the "social scene" and "student groups/clubs to join." This relatively large break of .7 indicates a major shift in how important these topics are; if one were to divide this table into high and low importance, those topics with ratings of 5.8 and above could be considered high important topics and those with ratings of 5.1 or below could be considered low importance topics.

9-point scale	(n=550) Mean (sd)
Graduation requirements	6.8 (2.3)
Career development	6.6 (2.3)
Computers and technology resources	6.4 (2.1)
Academic advising	6.3 (2.4)
General campus information	6.0 (2.0)
Help with course work	6.0 (2.4)
Physical health	5.9 (2.3)
Social scene	5.8 (2.4)
Student groups/clubs to join	5.1 (2.3)
Evening campus programs	4.8 (2.2)
Mental health	4.8 (2.6)
Illness/accident prevention	4.6 (2.3)
University rules and regulations	4.6 (2.3)

Q2. Which one of the following would be your *preferred source* of news and information about...

The following 13 tables are arranged in order of students' stated importance; importance ratings are summarized in the header of the tables. Each table shows the percentage of students preferring each information source for that particular area. For instance, 41% of students prefer websites for news and information about graduation requirements, the most important concern.

Websites and email account for a large proportion of preference in almost all of the tables. This could be a flaw in the design of the instrument, since web and email are broad categories of media, while other sources of information are more specific. This tends to skew the interpretations one may draw from the data. Luckily there are other means of summarizing this data (see perceptual maps below).

Graduation requirements 6.8/9	(n=549)
websites	41.0%
email	23.2%
professors	17.3%
mail	7.2%
CIVC	6.4%
teaching assistants	2.0%
house fellow/resident assistant	1.0%
student newspapers	1.0%
posters/kiosks	0.5%
friends	0.5%
family	0.0%
WSUM	0.0%
television	0.0%

Career development 6.6/9	(n=549)
email	24.8%
websites	26.4%
professors	26.0%
CIVC	6.4%
mail	5.6%
teaching assistants	3.2%
posters/kiosks	1.9%
student newspapers	1.8%
friends	1.7%
family	1.7%
television	0.4%
house fellow/resident assistant	0.2%
WSUM	0.0%

Computers and technology resources	(n=552)
6.4/9	
websites	41.1%
email	28.7%
CIVC	9.9%
friends	3.7%
student newspapers	3.7%
posters/kiosks	3.2%
mail	3.1%
teaching assistants	2.2%
house fellow/resident assistant	1.6%
professors	1.6%
family	0.5%
WSUM	0.5%
television	0.4%

Academic advising 6.3/9	(n=553)
professors	35.2%
email	30.1%
websites	17.3%
CIVC	4.5%
mail	4.4%
teaching assistants	4.4%
house fellow/resident assistant	1.1%
friends	1.1%
student newspapers	1.0%
posters/kiosks	0.6%
family	0.2%
television	0.2%
WSUM	0.0%

General campus information	(n=548)
6.0/9	
websites	39.8%
CIVC	22.4%
email	14.0%
student newspapers	8.6%
posters/kiosks	4.8%
mail	3.7%
house fellow/resident assistant	2.1%
friends	2.1%
WSUM	1.5%
professors	0.8%
family	0.2%
television	0.2%
teaching assistants	0.0%

Help with course work 6.0/9	(n=554)
professors	29.5%
teaching assistants	29.4%
websites	14.7%
email	13.4%
friends	6.5%
posters/kiosks	1.5%
CIVC	1.5%
student newspapers	1.4%
mail	1.4%
house fellow/resident assistant	0.4%
family	0.2%
WSUM	0.0%
television	0.0%

Physical health	(n=542)
5.9/9	
websites	33.6%
email	14.5%
CIVC	9.9%
mail	8.6%
student newspapers	8.2%
family	6.6%
friends	6.2%
posters/kiosks	4.5%
television	3.9%
house fellow/resident assistant	2.7%
professors	1.2%
teaching assistants	0.0%
WSUM	0.0%

Social scene 5.8/9	(n=548)
friends	32.5%
websites	16.1%
student newspapers	16.1%
posters/kiosks	14.2%
email	12.0%
mail	2.3%
television	2.0%
WSUM	1.4%
house fellow/resident assistant	1.2%
family	1.1%
CIVC	0.6%
professors	0.3%
teaching assistants	0.0%

Student groups/clubs to join	(n=546)
5.1/9	
websites	25.6%
email	19.9%
posters/kiosks	17.7%
friends	11.7%
student newspapers	11.6%
CIVC	5.5%
mail	4.5%
professors	1.2%
house fellow/resident assistant	1.0%
WSUM	0.5%
teaching assistants	0.4%
family	0.2%
television	0.2%

Evening campus programs	(n=546)
4.8/9	

email	20.9%
websites	22.6%
posters/kiosks	16.6%
student newspapers	15.6%
CIVC	6.0%
friends	5.5%
mail	5.5%
house fellow/resident assistant	1.9%
professors	1.9%
television	1.5%
WSUM	1.2%
teaching assistants	0.7%
family	0.2%

Mental health 4.8/9	(n=539)
websites	32.9%
email	12.1%
family	10.5%
CIVC	8.6%
friends	8.2%
student newspapers	7.5%
mail	5.7%
posters/kiosks	5.4%
house fellow/resident assistant	4.0%
television	3.2%
professors	1.4%
teaching assistants	0.2%
WSUM	0.2%

Illness/accident prevention	(n=532)
4.6/9	

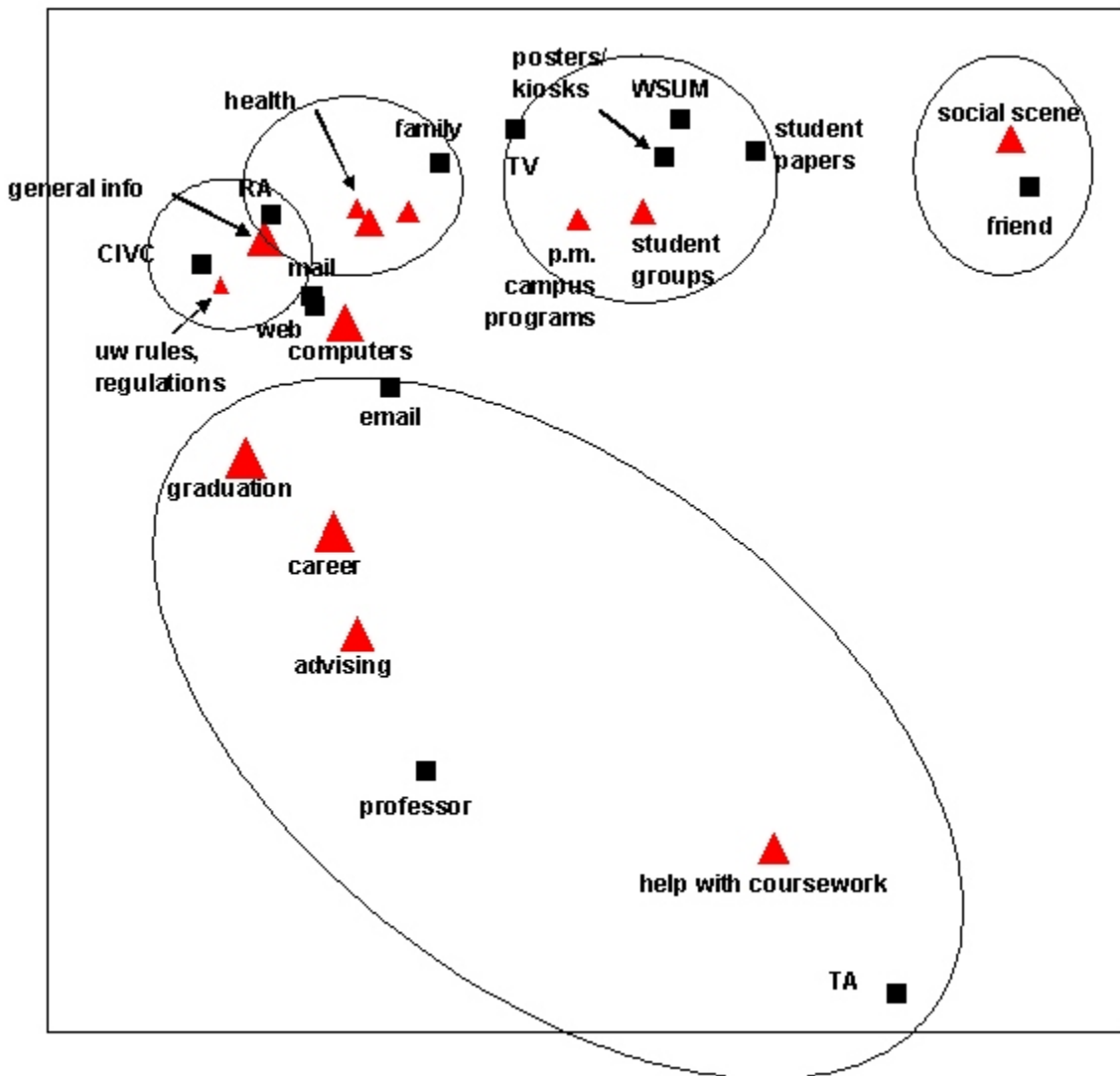
websites	32.2%
email	14.2%
CIVC	10.5%
student newspapers	8.4%
mail	8.0%
posters/kiosks	7.7%
family	6.5%
house fellow/resident assistant	4.2%
television	3.6%
friends	3.4%
WSUM	0.8%
professors	0.4%
teaching assistants	0.0%

University rules and regulations 4.6/9	(n=549)
websites	42.7%
CIVC	14.6%
email	14.0%
mail	7.7%
house fellow/resident assistant	6.8%
student newspapers	5.2%
professors	3.6%
posters/kiosks	2.7%
friends	1.5%
family	0.5%
teaching assistants	0.5%
WSUM	0.2%
television	0.0%

The figure below is called a perceptual map and visually summarizes the data contained in the 13 tables above. Using a technique called correspondence analysis, perceptual maps afford us a wealth of information in a visual format. Perceptual maps are often used in positioning studies because they show the position of each variable relative to all other variables.

How to interpret: Information sources are represented as squares and topics are triangles. The reader can see which sources are with particular topics by looking at the distances between a source and a topic. Basically, items closer to each other indicate greater preference. This map also incorporates the importance data from Question 1 as the size of each triangle; larger triangles were rated more important by students.

The layout mitigates the influence that email and websites had on the categorical data in the 13 tables above. For instance, news about the social scene is preferred almost exclusively from one's friends. Students prefer posters, WSUM, student papers and TV for news on extra-curricular activities on campus. For health concerns, it's family and housing assistants. And students prefer the CIVC and RAs for general campus information and regulations. And the most important topics—the academic ones—are strongly associated with professors and TAs.



Q3. What complaints, if any, do you have about receiving information from UW-Madison?

The following two tables summarize volunteered responses to Questions 3 and 4. These questions were designed to allow students to communicate both frustrations and suggestions in communicating with the University. Approximately half of respondents volunteered information for each question.

A text analysis software program was employed to categorize the responses. Keep in mind that these categories are rough summaries of the text submitted by students. A separate report containing the full text of student responses is available.

Many students complained about being overwhelmed with emails and information. While students favor email as a medium for communicating on campus, they emphasized brevity and ease in *finding* information. And while we ostensibly asked about communication problems, a sizable contingent of students voiced concerns about academic advising in both open-end questions.

	(n=270)
received email with information that was too long	56%
send out important campus information to students	30%
hard to find whom to ask	19%
help with academic advising	12%
need graduation requirements	12%

Q4. What could UW-Madison do to improve its communication with students?

	(n=282)
send announcements via email	34%
improve websites, easier to find information	24%
better job advising	17%
publish academic events frequently	14%
site with a general contact list of phone numbers	13%

Demographics

The tables below present the demographic data of this survey's respondents. With the exception of sex (which is slightly skewed towards female), these data appear very similar to the distributions found in the student population at large.

Age in years	(n=572)
Mean	23.8
Median	21.3
Standard deviation	7.8
Minimum	16
Maximum	83

Sex	(n=572)
Female	55.5%
Male	45.5%

Class	(n=572)
Freshman	13.3%
Sophomore	15.7%
Junior	17.8%
Senior	21.8%
Graduate	27.4%
Special	4.1%

Race	(n=572)
White	80.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.3%
Black	2.3%
Hispanic	1.4%
American Indian	0.2%
Not ascertained	11.4%
