

## Introduction

The Priorities Survey for Online Learners (PSOL) is an online survey designed and administered by Ruffalo Noel Levitz that allows institutions to identify what matters most to online learners and assess their level of satisfaction. The survey instrument measures student perceptions in five broad areas. Individual survey items are rolled up in to the following *Survey Scales*:

- Academic Services
- Enrollment Services
- Institutional Perceptions
- Instructional Services
- Student Services

Results from student satisfaction surveys, such as the PSOL, may be used to guide strategic action planning, strengthen student retention initiatives, and chart progress toward campus goals.

Spring 2021 is the third administration of the PSOL at Lake Superior College, with previous administrations taking place in 2015 and 2017.

## Methodology

The PSOL was administering to all Spring 2021 students taking one or more online course. In total, 2,806 students were invited to take the survey. Although multiple reminder emails were sent over a 4-week administration period, the response rate was only 8.37%.

In addition, comparisons with earlier administrations of the PSOL (2015 and 2017) should be viewed with caution. Due to significant changes in course delivery methods resulting from the COVID19 pandemic, many Spring 2021 students were online out of necessity because a face-to-face option was not available, while other students were online by choice. A campus-defined demographic item was included in the survey that allows us to compare responses from these two subpopulations.

Most of the survey items, including ten that are campus-defined, are rated by respondents for both importance and satisfaction based on the following Likert scale:

1 – Not Important at all / Not Satisfied at all

2 – Not Very Important / Not Very Satisfied

Lake Superior College – Institutional Research – 6/9/2021

Source: Ruffalo Noel Levitz PSOL survey results

- 3 – Somewhat Unimportant / Somewhat Dissatisfied
- 4 – Neutral
- 5 – Somewhat Important / Somewhat Satisfied
- 6 – Important / Satisfied
- 7 – Very Important / Very Satisfied

## Demographics

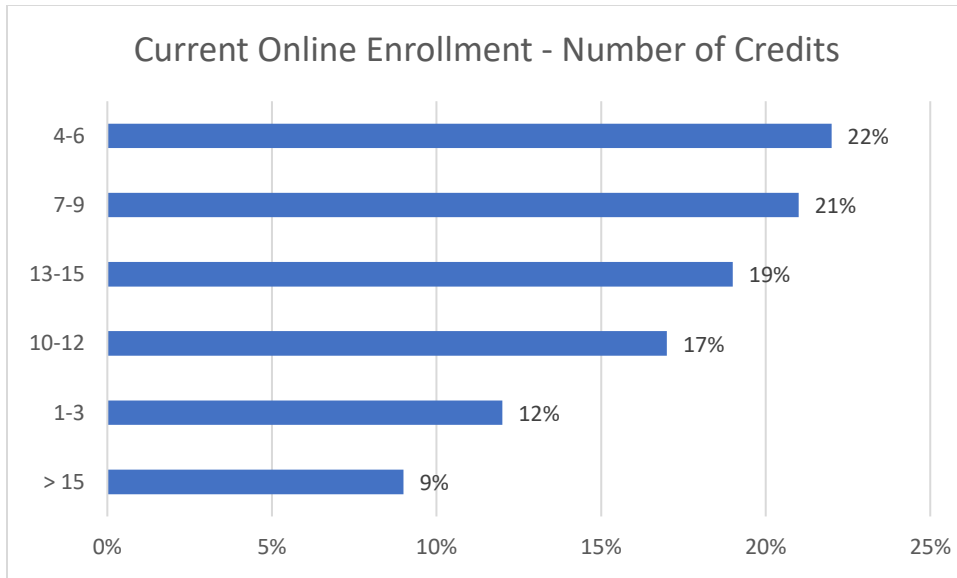
44% of the survey respondents reported that all their instruction is delivered online, while 56% reported that some of their instruction is delivered face-to-face.

63% indicated they are taking online courses *only* because a face-to-face option was not available to them. In contrast, approximately 37% reported that they consider themselves to be online students and prefer the online course delivery format.

Additional demographic data are summarized in Table 1, with self-reported current online enrollment (number of credits) depicted in Figure 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic data for survey respondents (N = 235)

<b>Gender</b>			<b>Age</b>	
Male	37%		Traditional (<=24)	42%
Female	63%		Non-Traditional (>24)	58%
<b>Race / Ethnicity</b>			<b>Class Load</b>	
Students of Color	12%		Part-time	39%
White	79%		Full-time	61%
Prefer not to respond	9%			
<b>Current Enrollment Status</b>			<b>Employment</b>	
Primarily on-campus	28%		Full-time	28%
Primarily online	72%		Part-time	43%
			Not employed	29%
<b>Educational Goal</b>			<b>Current Plans</b>	
Certification	11%		Transfer credits	17%
Associate Degree	57%		Complete this course	21%
Bachelor's or Master's Degree	21%		Complete online degree program	24%
Doctoral or Professional Degree	4%		Complete degree on campus	39%
Job-related training	3%			
Other	5%			



**Figure 1.** Current online enrollment – number of credits

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate their Major/Program. Those most represented within the survey results include Nursing (17%), Associate of Arts Degree (15%), and Associate Degree Transfer Pathways (14%), followed by Computer Careers (6%) and Physical Therapy Assistant (5%).

### Student Perceptions – Survey Scales

For each of the five survey scales, Table 2 provides the importance and satisfaction scores, along with the performance gap score (the mathematical difference between the importance and satisfaction scores). The larger the performance gap, the greater the discrepancy between what the students expect and their current level of satisfaction. The smaller the gap, the better we are doing at meeting student expectations.

Both the largest performance gap score and the lowest satisfaction score are associated with *Instructional Services*. In contrast, *Student Services* and *Academic Services* are associated with the lowest performance gap scores, suggesting we are better meeting student expectations in these areas.

**Table 2.** Survey scales – average importance and satisfaction scores, with performance gap

	<b>Importance</b>	<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Performance Gap</b>
Academic Services	6.27	5.85	0.42
Enrollment Services	6.44	5.90	0.54
Institutional Perceptions	6.29	5.76	0.53
Instructional Services	6.28	5.61	0.67
Student Services	6.20	5.79	0.41

### **Institutional Strengths – Survey Items**

Ruffalo Noel Levitz defines *Strengths* as items rated with high importance and high satisfaction. These are specifically identified as items above the mid-point in importance (top half) and in the upper quartile (25%) of the satisfaction scores:

**Table 3.** Institutional *Strengths* with Importance, Satisfaction, and Gap scores

	<b>Imp</b>	<b>Satis</b>	<b>Gap</b>
My program advisor is accessible by telephone and e-mail	6.42	6.13	0.29
This institution responds quickly when I request information	6.43	5.93	0.50
Billing and payment procedures are convenient for me	6.46	6.07	0.39
Registration for online courses is convenient	6.50	6.30	0.20

### **Institutional Challenges – Survey Items**

*Challenges* are defined as items rated with high importance and either low satisfaction or a large performance gap. These are specifically identified as items above the mid-point in importance (top half) and **either** in the lower quartile (25%) of the satisfaction scores **or** in the upper quartile (25%) of the performance gap scores:

**Table 4.** Institutional *Challenges* with Importance, Satisfaction, and Gap scores

	<b>Imp</b>	<b>Satis</b>	<b>Gap</b>
Campus item: My online instructors are proficient in using the Learning Management System (D2L Brightspace).	6.45	5.51	0.94
Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.*	6.51	5.58	0.93
Adequate financial aid is available.*	6.44	5.53	0.91
Campus item: My online instructors are present and engaged in my courses.	6.45	5.59	0.86
Campus item: Online course materials are available in formats that are easy to use.	6.52	5.68	0.84
The quality of online instruction is excellent.*	6.44	5.08	1.36
Faculty are responsive to student needs.*	6.62	5.65	0.97

\*LSC satisfaction score is significantly lower than the national average

In addition to those specifically defined as *Challenges*, it's important to examine survey items rated with the lowest satisfaction scores and/or highest performance gap scores (Table 5). Those designated as “*Campus Item*” in Table 5 are among the ten LSC custom survey items (Campus-defined), which are discussed more fully in the following section of this report.

**Table 5.** Additional survey items with low Satisfaction and/or high Gap scores

	<b>Imp</b>	<b>Satis</b>	<b>Gap</b>
Campus item: The quality of online instruction at LSC is equal to or better than LSC face-to-face classes.	6.14	4.42	1.72
Campus item: I was well informed about what taking classes online involved before I registered for my first online course.	6.27	5.31	0.96
Instructional materials are appropriate for program content.*	6.50	5.67	0.83
Channels are available for providing timely responses to student complaints.	6.11	5.28	0.83
The frequency of student and instructor interactions is adequate.*	6.47	5.66	0.81

\*LSC satisfaction score is significantly lower than the national average

To put these results into context, the overall 2021 LSC PSOL response ranges and mean scores (based on all survey items) for the three metrics, are provided below:

**Importance** - Range: 4.30 to 6.62; mean = 6.12

**Satisfaction** - Range: 4.42 to 6.30; mean = 5.71

**Gap score** - Range: 1.72 to -0.32 mean = 0.56 (a negative gap score indicates we are *exceeding* student expectations)

## Campus-defined Items

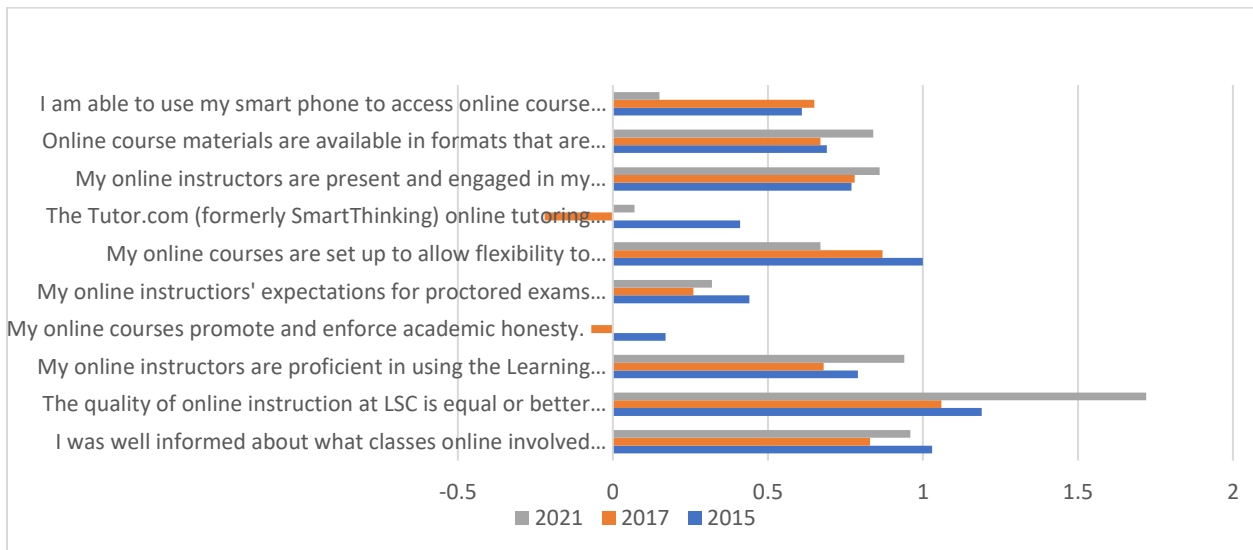
Also of particular interest are the ten LSC custom survey items (Table 6). Unfortunately, a number of these are associated with low satisfaction scores and/or high performance gap scores, indicating that we are not currently meeting student expectations.

Most notably, the scores suggest that students feel their online instructors lack proficiency in D2L Brightspace, the quality of online instruction is inferior to face-to-face course delivery, and they were not well informed about what online classes involve prior to registration.

Trends in performance gap scores over the 2015, 2017, and 2021 PSOL survey administrations are represented visually in Figure 2. On the positive side (lower gap scores over time) is increased ability to access online course content via smartphone, as well as set up of online courses to allow flexibility for completion of coursework. On the negative side, there are increased performance gap scores for a number of items that fall within the *Instructional Services* area (Figure 2).

**Table 6.** LSC-defined survey items with Importance, Satisfaction, and Gap scores

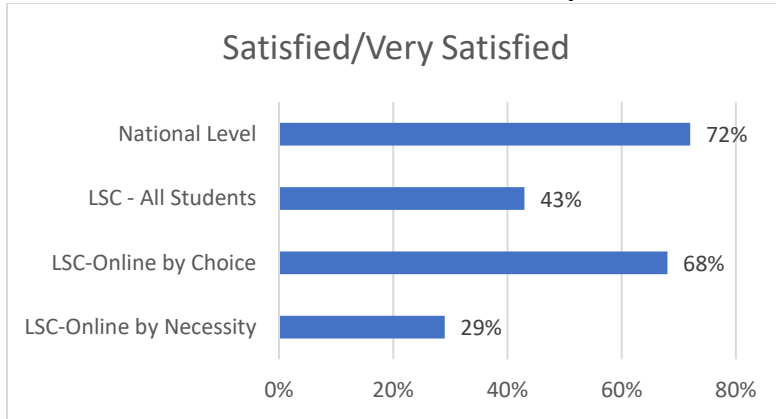
		Imp	Satis	Gap
1	I was well informed about what classes online involved before I registered for my fist online course.	6.27	5.31	0.96
2	The quality of online instruction at LSC is equal or better than LSC face-to-face classes.	6.14	4.42	1.72
3	My online instructors are proficient in using the Learning Management System (D2L Brightspace).	6.45	5.51	0.94
4	My online courses promote and enforce academic honesty.	6.24	6.24	0.00
5	My online instructors' expectations for proctored exams or other work that cannot be completed online are clearly stated.	6.27	5.95	0.32
6	My online courses are set up to allow flexibility to complete my work.	6.50	5.83	0.67
7	The Tutor.com (formerly <i>SmartThinking</i> ) online tutoring services are valuable to me.	5.57	5.50	0.07
8	My online instructors are present and engaged in my courses.	6.45	5.59	0.86
9	Online course materials are available in formats that are easy to use.	6.52	5.68	0.84
10	I am able to use my smart phone to access online course content.	6.08	5.93	0.15



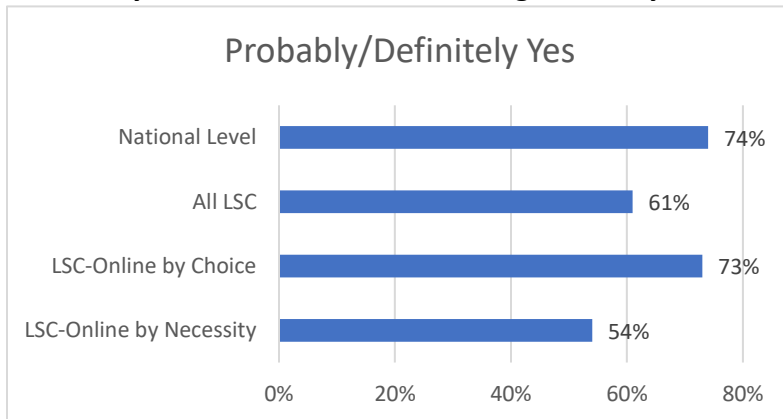
**Figure 2.** Campus items - trends in performance gap scores

## Summary Items – Overall Expectations and Satisfaction

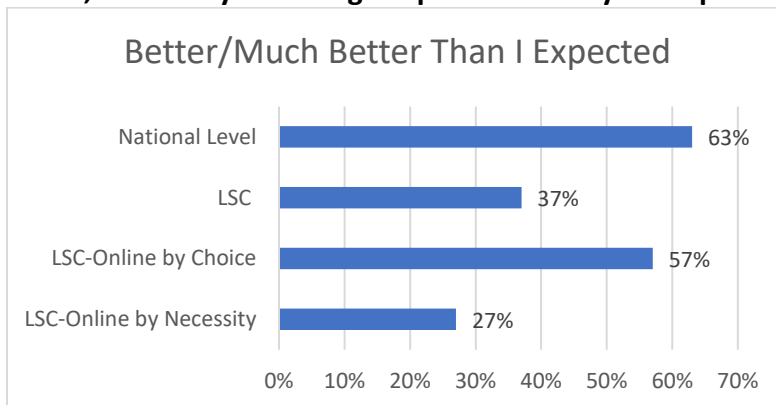
**How satisfied are our online students compared with online students nationally?**



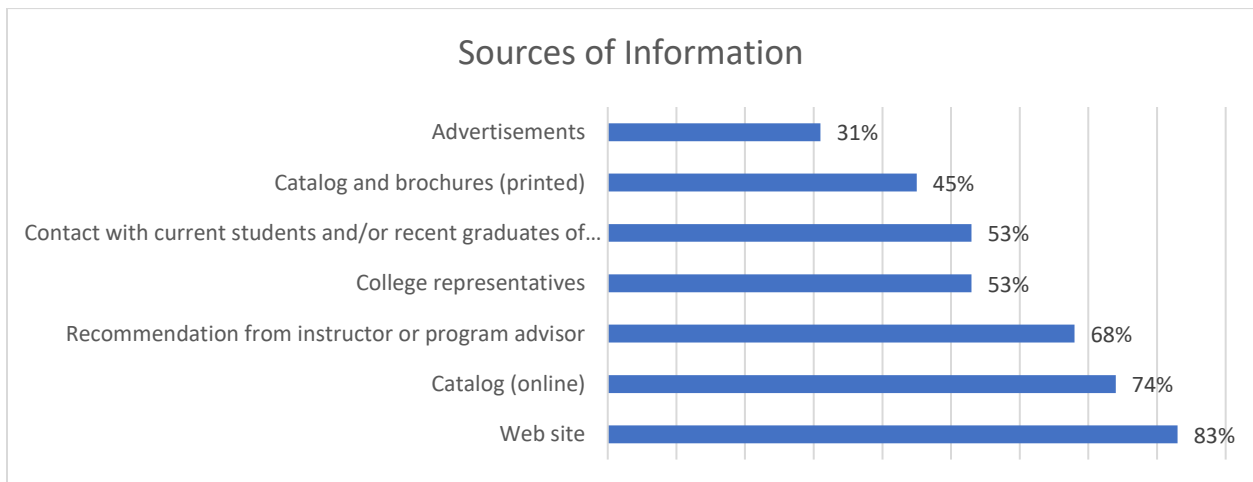
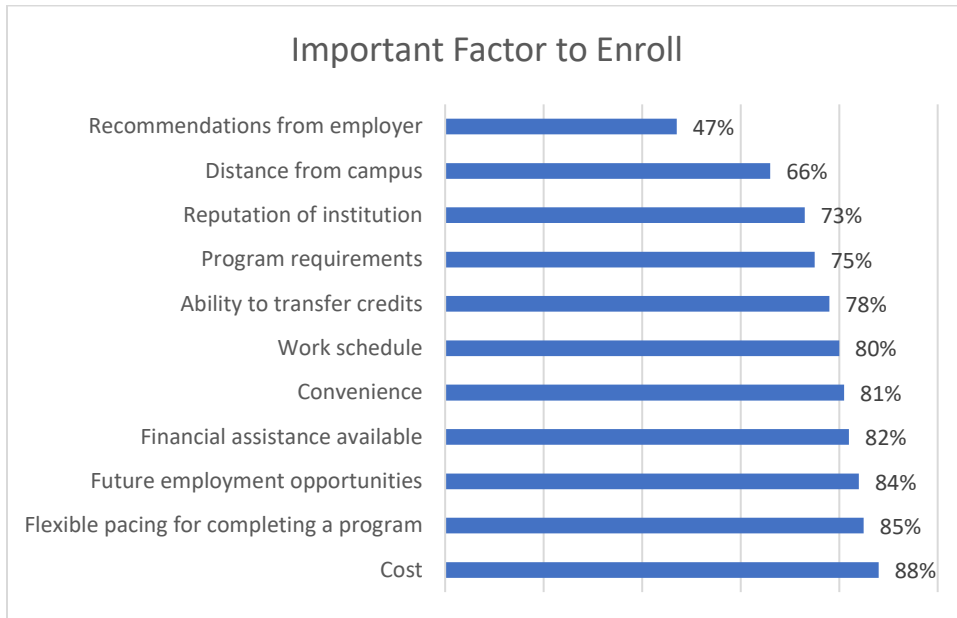
**How likely are our students to enroll again if they had it to do over?**



**So far, how has your college experience met your expectations?**



## Enrollment Factors and Sources of Information





## Discussion

In general, a low response rate calls into question the validity of survey results. Interpretation is further complicated by the recent onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated significant changes in course delivery methods. A number of instructors who typically teach face-to-face were required to abruptly shift to an online format. Therefore, it's not surprising to find that many of our institutional challenges fall under *Instructional Services*.

When data are partitioned to differentiate students who self-report as online by choice vs online by necessity, we see significant differences in responses—with the latter group being less satisfied, which is not unexpected.

A complete list of the survey items can be found in the Appendix.

## Appendix – PSOL Survey Items

No.	Item
1	This institution has a good reputation.
2	My program advisor is accessible by telephone and e-mail.
3	Instructional materials are appropriate for program content.
4	Faculty provide timely feedback about student progress.
5	My program advisor helps me work toward career goals.
6	Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment.
7	Program requirements are clear and reasonable.
8	Student-to-student collaborations are valuable to me.
9	Adequate financial aid is available.
10	This institution responds quickly when I request information.
11	Student assignments are clearly defined in the syllabus.
12	There are sufficient offerings within my program of study.
13	The frequency of student and instructor interactions is adequate.
14	I receive timely information on the availability of financial aid.
15	Channels are available for providing timely responses to student complaints.
16	Appropriate technical assistance is readily available.
17	Assessment and evaluation procedures are clear and reasonable.
18	Registration for online courses is convenient.
19	Online career services are available.
20	The quality of online instruction is excellent.
21	Adequate online library resources are provided.
22	I am aware of whom to contact for questions about programs and services.
23	Billing and payment procedures are convenient for me.
24	Tutoring services are readily available for online courses.
25	Faculty are responsive to student needs.
26	The bookstore provides timely service to students.
27	Campus item: I was well informed about what taking classes online involved before I registered for my first online course.
28	Campus item: The quality of online instruction at LSC is equal to or better than LSC face-to-face classes.
29	Campus item: My online instructors are proficient in using the Learning Management System (D2L Brightspace).
30	Campus item: My online courses promote and enforce academic honesty.
31	Campus item: My online instructors' expectations for proctored exams or other work that cannot be completed online are clearly stated.
32	Campus item: My online courses are set up to allow flexibility to complete my work.
33	Campus item: The Tutor.com online tutoring services are valuable to me.
34	Campus item: My online instructors are present and engaged in my courses.

<b>35</b>	Campus item: Online course materials are available in formats that are easy to use.
<b>36</b>	Campus item: I am able to use my smart phone to access online course content.
<b>37</b>	Source of information: Catalog and brochures (printed)
<b>38</b>	Source of information: Catalog (online)
<b>39</b>	Source of information: College representatives
<b>40</b>	Source of information: Web site
<b>41</b>	Source of information: Advertisements
<b>42</b>	Source of information: Recommendation from instructor or program advisor
<b>43</b>	Source of information: Contact with current students and / or recent graduates of the program
<b>44</b>	Factor to enroll: Ability to transfer credits
<b>45</b>	Factor to enroll: Cost
<b>46</b>	Factor to enroll: Financial assistance available
<b>47</b>	Factor to enroll: Future employment opportunities
<b>48</b>	Factor to enroll: Reputation of institution
<b>49</b>	Factor to enroll: Work schedule
<b>50</b>	Factor to enroll: Flexible pacing for completing a program
<b>51</b>	Factor to enroll: Convenience
<b>52</b>	Factor to enroll: Distance from campus
<b>53</b>	Factor to enroll: Program requirements
<b>54</b>	Factor to enroll: Recommendations from employer