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 into 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 2023 is the fourth administration of the PSOL at Lake Superior College, with previous administrations taking place in 2015, 2017, and 2021.

Contents

Methodology

The PSOL was administering to all Spring 2023 students taking one or more online course. In total, 1,650 students were invited to take the survey. Although multiple reminder emails were sent over a 4-week administration period, the response rate was only 8.06%.

In addition, comparisons with earlier administrations of the PSOL (2015, 2017, 2021) 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 Spring 2021 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
3 – Somewhat Unimportant / Somewhat Dissatisfied
4 – Neutral
5 – Somewhat Important / Somewhat Satisfied
6 – Important / Satisfied
7 – Very Important / Very Satisfied

Demographics

45% of the survey respondents reported that all their instruction is delivered online, while 55% reported that some of their instruction is delivered face-to-face.

45% indicated they are taking online courses *only* because a face-to-face option was not available to them. In contrast, approximately 55% 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. Please note that this survey does not mandate answering all questions. Respondents have the option to skip any question they prefer not to answer. The number of students who responded to each demographic question is indicated by N=

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR SURVEY RESPONDENTS

| Gender N=119			Age N=119	
Male	24%		Traditional (<=24)	43%
Female	72%		Non-Traditional (>24)	57%
Prefer not to respond	3%			
Genderqueer	2%			
Race / Ethnicity N=119			Class Load N=133	
Students of Color	10%		Part-time	37%
White	86%		Full-time	63%
Prefer not to respond	4%			
Current Enrollment Status N=133			Employment N=126	
Primarily on-campus	59%		Full-time	39%
Primarily online	41%		Part-time	42%
			Not employed	19%
Educational Goal N=127			Current Plans N=125	
Certification	6%		Transfer credits	20%
Associate Degree	54%		Complete this course	15%
Bachelor's or Master's Degree	23%		Complete online degree program	28%
Doctoral or Professional Degree	3%		Complete degree on campus	37%
Job-related training	2%			
Other	11%			
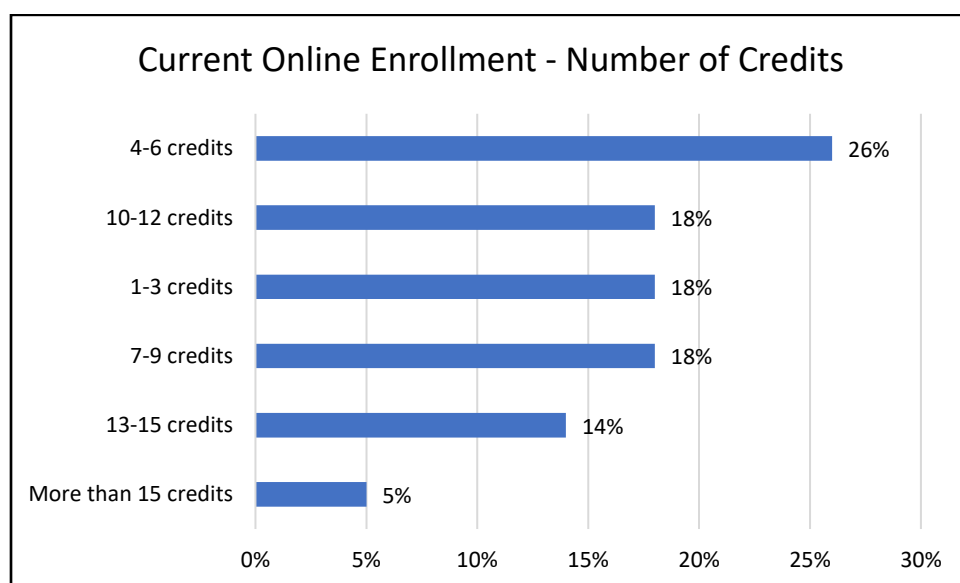
FIGURE 1. CURRENT ONLINE ENROLLMENT – NUMBER OF CREDITS

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate their Major/Program. Those most represented within the survey results include Associate of Arts Degree (16.4%), and Nursing (15.6%), followed by Associate Degree Transfer Pathways and Computer Careers (both at 8.6%).

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.

The Academic Services and Student Services have the highest satisfaction scores and the lowest performance gap indicating we are effectively meeting student expectations in these areas. performance gap score and the lowest satisfaction score are associated with *Instructional Services*. While Instructional Services continues from the previous PSOL survey to have the lowest satisfaction score and a higher gap performance. It is important to note that Enrollment Services exhibits both a higher gap performance and a higher rate of satisfaction, suggesting that while students are relatively more satisfied with this aspect compared to others, their satisfaction levels do not align with its importance to them.

TABLE 2. SURVEY SCALES – AVERAGE IMPORTANCE AND SATISFACTION SCORES, WITH PERFORMANCE GAP

	Importance	Satisfaction	Performance Gap
Academic Services	6.44	6.07	0.37
Enrollment Services	6.55	5.99	0.56
Institutional Perceptions	6.35	5.91	0.44
Instructional Services	6.37	5.88	0.49
Student Services	6.41	5.99	0.42

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

	Imp	Satis	Gap
Registration for online courses is convenient.	6.77	6.51	0.26
Program requirements are clear and reasonable.	6.71	6.12	0.59
Campus item: My online instructors' expectations for proctored exams or other work that cannot be completed online are clearly stated.	6.64	6.12	0.52

Assessment and evaluation procedures are clear and reasonable.	6.58	6.17	0.41
Campus item: My online courses promote and enforce academic honesty.	6.58	6.37	0.21
My program advisor is accessible by telephone and e-mail.	6.55	6.42	0.13
Billing and payment procedures are convenient for me.	6.54	6.14	0.40

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

	Imp	Satis	Gap
The quality of online instruction is excellent.	6.72	5.65	1.07
Campus item: My online instructors are proficient in using the Learning Management System (D2L Brightspace).	6.72	5.92	0.80
Campus item: Online course materials are available in formats that are easy to use.	6.71	5.85	0.86
Campus item: My online instructors are present and engaged in my courses.	6.68	5.78	0.90
Adequate financial aid is available.	6.51	5.57	0.94

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).

TABLE 5. ADDITIONAL SURVEY ITEMS WITH LOW SATISFACTION AND/OR HIGH GAP SCORES

	Imp	Satis	Gap
Campus item: The quality of online instruction at LSC is equal to or better than LSC face-to-face classes.	6.43	4.96	1.47
Campus item: I was well informed about what taking classes online involved before I registered for my first online course.	6.48	5.62	0.86
Tuition Paid is a worthwhile investment	6.44	5.62	0.82
I receive timely information on the availability of financial aid.	6.36	5.65	0.71
Campus item: My online courses are set up to allow flexibility to complete my work.	6.73	6.03	0.70

To put these results into context, the overall 2023 LSC PSOL response ranges and mean scores (based on all survey items) for the three metrics, are provided below:

Importance - Range: 4.32 to 6.77; mean = 6.25
Satisfaction - Range: 4.96 to 6.51; mean = 5.93

Gap score - Range: 1.47 to -0.52 mean = 0.51 (a negative gap score indicates we are *exceeding* student expectations)

Out of all the items surveyed, only one showed a significant difference compared to the national average. Specifically, the item "There are sufficient offerings within my program of study" had a higher gap score for LSC than the national average, but it still fell below our institutional challenges. The remaining survey items were comparable to the national averages.

Survey items designated as *"Campus Item"* in Tables 3, 4, and 5 are among the ten LSC custom survey items (Campus-defined), which are discussed more fully in the following section of this report.

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 that the quality of online instruction is inferior to face-to-face course delivery, that there is a lack in quality of online instruction, and there isn't an adequate amount of financial aid available.

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) there continues to be an increased satisfaction with flexibility for completion of coursework, and increase in value for online tutoring. 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

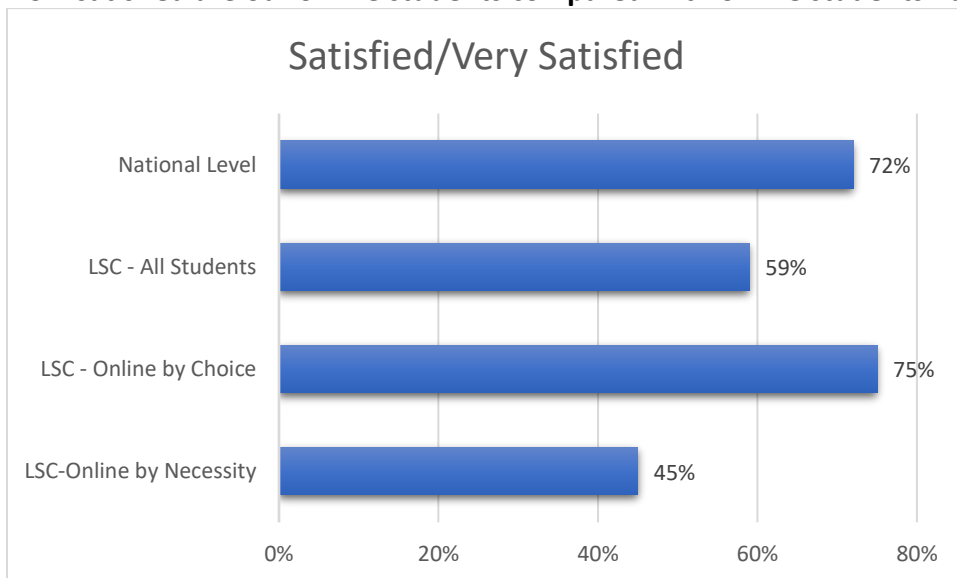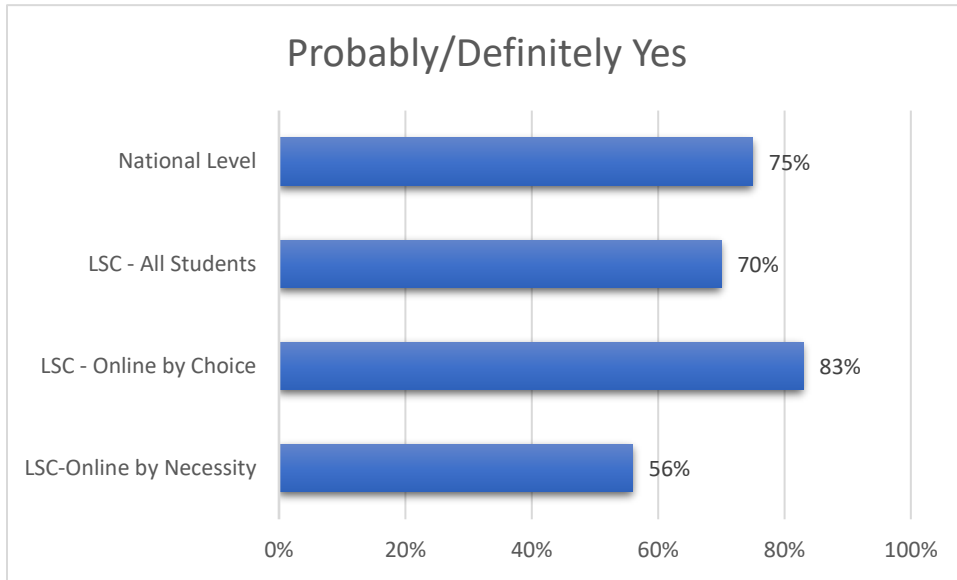|		Imp	Satis	Gap
1	I was well informed about what classes online involved before I registered for my fist online course.	6.48	5.62	0.86
2	The quality of online instruction at LSC is equal or better than LSC face-to-face classes.	6.43	4.96	1.47
3	My online instructors are proficient in using the Learning Management System (D2L Brightspace).	6.72	5.92	0.80
4	My online courses promote and enforce academic honesty.	6.58	6.37	0.21
5	My online instructors' expectations for proctored exams or other work that cannot be completed online are clearly stated.	6.64	6.12	0.52
6	My online courses are set up to allow flexibility to complete my work.	6.73	6.03	0.7
7	The Tutor.com (formerly *SmartThinking*) online tutoring services are valuable to me.	5.93	5.89	0.04
8	My online instructors are present and engaged in my courses.	6.68	5.78	0.90
9	Online course materials are available in formats that are easy to use.	6.71	5.85	0.86
10	I am able to use my smart phone to access online course content.	6.30	5.99	0.31
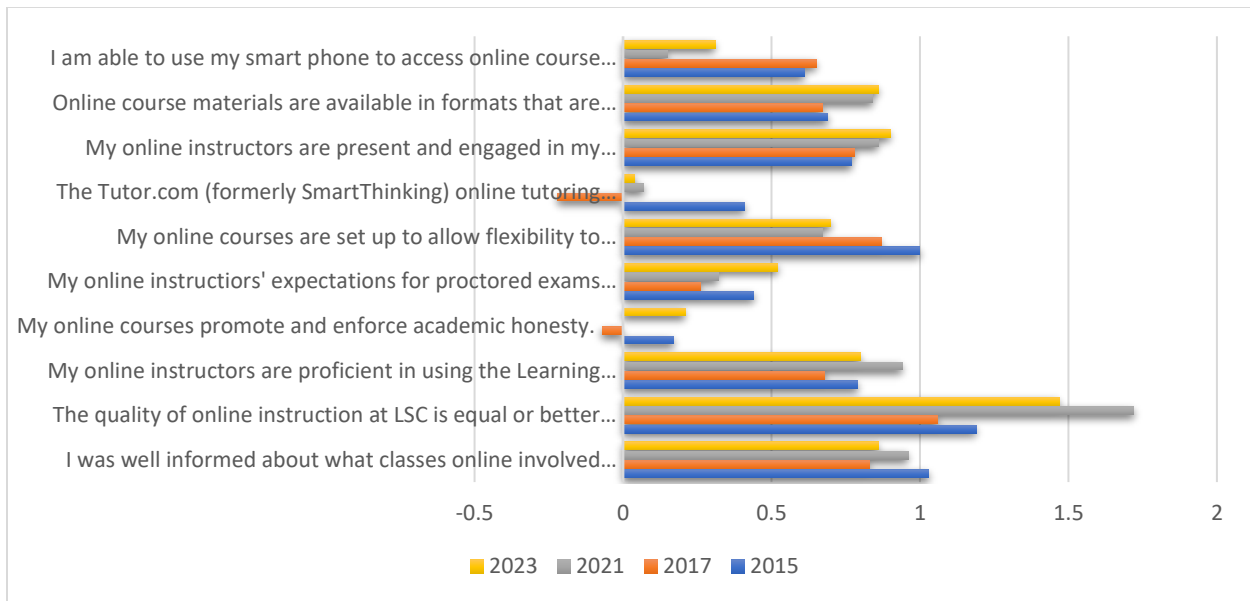
FIGURE 2. CAMPUS ITEMS – TRENDS IN PERFORMANCE GAP SCORES

Summary Items – Overall Expectations and Satisfaction

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

Satisfied/Very Satisfied

National Level	72%
LSC - All Students	59%
LSC - Online by Choice	75%
LSC-Online by Necessity	45%

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

Probably/Definitely Yes

Category	Percentage
National Level	75%
LSC - All Students	70%
LSC - Online by Choice	83%
LSC-Online by Necessity	56%

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

Better/Much Better Than I Expected

Category	Percentage
National Level	63%
LSC - All Students	43%
LSC - Online by Choice	51%
LSC-Online by Necessity	35%
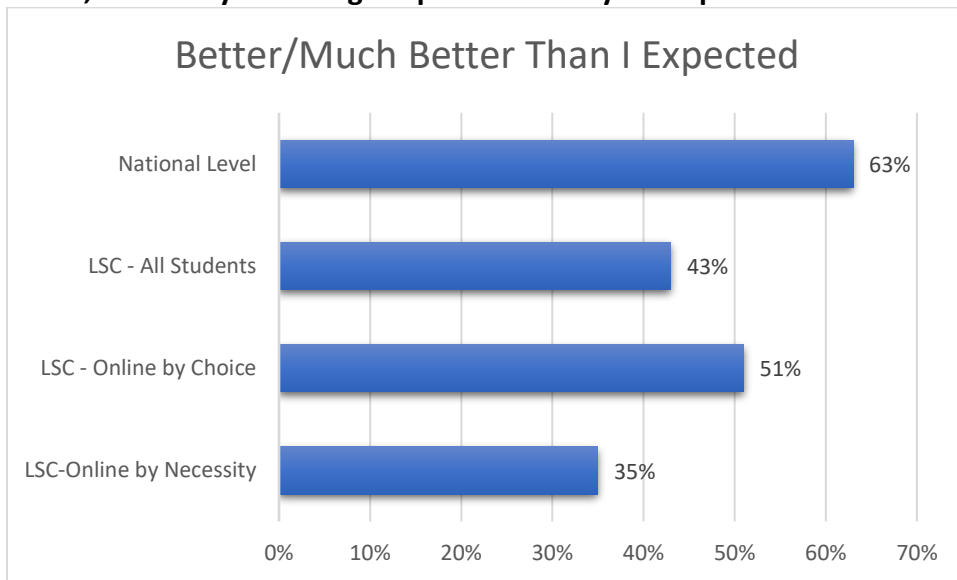
Enrollment Factors and Sources of Information

Important Factor to Enroll

Factor	Percentage
Recommendations from employer	53%
Distance from campus	62%
Reputation of institution	69%
Future employment opportunities	79%
Program requirements	80%
Financial assistance available	82%
Flexible pacing for completing a program	83%
Work schedule	83%
Cost	86%
Ability to transfer credits	87%
Convenience	91%

Sources of Information

Source	Percentage
Advertisements	32%
Catalog and brochures (printed)	46%
Contact with current students and / or recent graduates of…	51%
College representatives	53%
Catalog (online)	69%
Recommendation from instructor or program advisor	71%
Web site	85%

Discussion

A low response rate raises concerns about the validity of survey results in general. The response rate this year was lower than all of the previous years.

When the data is segmented to distinguish between students who self-report as online by choice and those who are online by necessity, there are notable differences in responses, with the latter group showing lower levels of satisfaction. This finding is in line with expectations. Compared to the 2021 PSOL survey, the online by necessity students have had an increase in satisfaction, likelihood to re-enroll, and a better/much better experience than what they were expecting. Keep in mind, the 2021 PSOL survey was completed after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which there were several classes typically taught face-to-face being taught online.

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.

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