

AY24-25: Graduating Senior Survey

In Their Own Words: Themes Raised in Responses to Open-Ended Questions

The Graduating Senior Survey included the following two open-ended questions:

1. *“When you think about your time as an undergraduate student at NC State, what would you say has had the most positive impact on your overall experience here?”*
2. *“What is the most important thing that NC State could do to improve the quality of undergraduates' experiences here?”*

A total of 1,513 seniors responded to the first question, and 1,377 responded to the second. Responses were coded into 58 themes, with each comment potentially spanning multiple categories. Tables 26 and 27 below provide the distribution of comments coded into each theme. The summaries below highlight some of the most frequently mentioned themes, with selected student quotes to illustrate key points. A complete list of verbatim responses, organized by theme, are available on the [UDA website](#).

Table 26: Themes Identified in Responses to What Had the Most Positive Impact on Student's Overall Experience

topic	N	%
Instruction	700	52.3%
Community	632	47.2%
Course of Study	367	27.4%
Academic College/Department	338	25.2%
Clubs and Organizations	273	20.4%
Personal Development	173	12.9%
Career Planning	167	12.5%
Health	160	11.9%
Learning	152	11.4%
Academic Performance	112	8.4%
Curriculum	105	7.8%
Academic Advising	102	7.6%
Activities	98	7.3%
Athletics	87	6.5%
Housing	73	5.5%
University Recreation	70	5.2%
Research	62	4.6%
Mental Health	61	4.6%
Spirit and Pride	49	3.7%

Table 26: Themes Identified in Responses to What Had the Most Positive Impact on Student's Overall Experience (continued)

topic	N	%
Greek Life	44	3.3%
International Experiences	42	3.1%
Academic Rigor	40	3.0%
Technology	35	2.6%
Financial Aid	32	2.4%
Facilities and Equipment	29	2.2%
Home	28	2.1%
Transportation	28	2.1%
Transfer Student	24	1.8%
Graduation	23	1.7%
Libraries	22	1.6%
Registration	21	1.6%
Location	20	1.5%
Arts	19	1.4%
Campus Safety	18	1.3%
Dining	17	1.3%
Grad School Prep	15	1.1%
University Prestige	14	1.0%
Communication	13	1.0%
Covid-19	13	1.0%
Non-Traditional Student	11	0.8%
Political Climate	9	0.7%
Student Feedback	9	0.7%
Physical Environment	8	0.6%
Work Experience	8	0.6%
University Scholars Program	7	0.5%
Enrollment	5	0.4%
Honors Program	4	0.3%
Orientation	4	0.3%
Service	4	0.3%
Caldwell Fellows Programs	3	0.2%
Distance Education	3	0.2%

Table 26: Themes Identified in Responses to What Had the Most Positive Impact on Student's Overall Experience (continued)

topic	N	%
First Year College	3	0.2%
Out of State	3	0.2%
Adjustment	2	0.1%
Administration	2	0.1%
Centers	2	0.1%
Environmental Safety	2	0.1%
Cashiers Office	1	0.1%
Survey	1	0.1%

Table 27: Themes Identified in Responses to What Could Improve Student's Overall Experience

topic	N	%
Instruction	541	47.0%
Course of Study	402	34.9%
Academic College/Department	219	19.0%
Mental Health	195	16.9%
Curriculum	165	14.3%
Transportation	150	13.0%
Community	148	12.8%
Career Planning	140	12.2%
Health	128	11.1%
Academic Advising	114	9.9%
Housing	112	9.7%
Facilities and Equipment	110	9.5%
Clubs and Organizations	104	9.0%
Academic Rigor	94	8.2%
Learning	85	7.4%
Financial Aid	80	6.9%
Dining	78	6.8%
Technology	71	6.2%
Student Feedback	63	5.5%

Table 27: Themes Identified in Responses to What Could Improve Student's Overall Experience (continued)

topic	N	%
Registration	62	5.4%
Physical Environment	55	4.8%
Academic Performance	54	4.7%
Activities	53	4.6%
Campus Safety	53	4.6%
Personal Development	53	4.6%
Research	42	3.6%
Transfer Student	34	3.0%
Athletics	33	2.9%
University Recreation	31	2.7%
Communication	30	2.6%
Graduation	28	2.4%
Covid-19	25	2.2%
Enrollment	20	1.7%
Libraries	19	1.6%
Distance Education	18	1.6%
Political Climate	18	1.6%
Location	17	1.5%
Non-Traditional Student	17	1.5%
Environmental Safety	15	1.3%
Home	14	1.2%
Spirit and Pride	13	1.1%
Grad School Prep	12	1.0%
Adjustment	9	0.8%
Arts	9	0.8%
University Prestige	9	0.8%
Administration	8	0.7%
International Experiences	8	0.7%
Survey	6	0.5%
Greek Life	5	0.4%
Orientation	4	0.3%

Table 27: Themes Identified in Responses to What Could Improve Student's Overall Experience (continued)

topic	N	%
Service	3	0.3%
Work Experience	2	0.2%
Caldwell Fellows Programs	1	0.1%
Cashiers Office	1	0.1%
First Year College	1	0.1%
Out of State	1	0.1%
University Scholars Program	1	0.1%

Examples of Common Themes

Instruction

Based on student responses to the open-ended questions, faculty play a central role in shaping students' experiences. Faculty and classroom instruction were the most frequently mentioned aspects of students' undergraduate experiences—both positively and negatively. Over half of students who commented on their best experiences highlighted the impact of professors, such as the extent to which they supported and motivated students and connected coursework to real-world applications.

Within my major, the professors were so kind and supportive, and having their encouragement and feedback, even if just for one semester, meant a lot to me.

Having professors who are passionate about their field of study but are able to [convey] it in ways that [we] as the students are able to understand.

At the same time, concerns about instruction were also common. Students described professors who seemed more focused on research than teaching, who were inaccessible, or who made courses unnecessarily difficult. Suggestions included hiring and rewarding faculty who value teaching and ensuring instructors stay current with modern, effective teaching practices.

Continuing to push professors who teach to have a focus on teaching the students and ensuring they present information in a clear manner that is accessible to all students.

Some professors... did not have the importance of learning information in mind and seemed to be trying to force people out of the major. The professors seemed to be trying to make a more-than-necessary difficult class that felt like a punishment rather than a good learning experience.

Sense of Community

Nearly half of seniors cited community—friendships, networks, and a sense of belonging—as the best part of their time at NC State. Students described peers, professors, alumni, and the larger Wolfpack community as sources of pride and support.

Belonging to the NC State community has most positively impacted my experience. My professors are supportive, intelligent, and want to see me succeed. My peers in Plant Biology are kind, open-minded, and engaged students. Alumni that I have met are often impressive and warm people. I feel proud to be a part of the NC State community!

Being a part of the Wolfpack! What a sense of community. Grinding out tough classes, going to parties, or celebrating the sports teams, everything is better when the Wolfpack is together.

Still, just over 10% of comments emphasized challenges in building or sustaining community. Students noted barriers such as individualism, lack of resources, or political divides, with transfer, non-traditional, and online students feeling this most acutely. They recommended more community-building opportunities within majors, in residence halls, and for students entering without a cohort.

Many students feel as if they are only one speck in the vast community of our school. One on one support is lacking in many areas of our campus, and I believe improvements in this could help students feel more welcome on campus.

Especially in the case of transfer students, events where new students have the chance to meet other new and existing students would help develop a stronger community at NC State.

Clubs and Organizations

Student clubs and organizations were another common highlight, offering social connection, skill-building, and professional development. Participation helped students feel they belonged.

CLUBS!! Join clubs! I have really enjoyed my time with the Biology club at State. I will also say that putting yourself out there and trying new things is so important. It may seem scary at first, but after doing so, I noticed a huge difference in my confidence and overall happiness.

Getting involved in a variety of organizations and connecting with faculty and staff has had the most positive impact as a student. The clubs connected me with faculty and I was eventually hired as a research assistant and worked at one of the animal units. Having great organizations on campus made the college environment more enjoyable and welcoming.

Close to 10% of students, however, mentioned challenges such as limited funding, poor communication, or lack of time to participate in clubs or organizations. They recommended greater institutional support to make organizations accessible and impactful.

More/easier ways to find organizations, resources, clubs. It can be hard to navigate all of it, and people miss what they are looking for.

Fund student organizations/clubs significantly more, as most of the learning and experience I have gained has come from them rather than my classes.

Career Planning

More than 10% of respondents praised opportunities such as internships, research, extension work, and access to a range of career services. These experiences gave students confidence in their career paths.

I think my involvement in research projects and labs has been the most positive impact at NC State. From working in the lab, I learned a lot about working as a researcher and from my mentor/other lab members. The experience definitely motivated me to continue on my career path.

My greatest concern was searching and finding a job before or shortly after graduating. I received excellent assistance from the career services staff and I landed an internship and full-time job a year in advance.

At the same time, many saw the need for improvements to help them with their career planning, such as expanded professional development, broader career fair representation, and more practical skill-building across majors. Some students emphasized the need for internships and industry connections.

This is major specific, but I would have really enjoyed a CALS career fair that included more non-veterinary animal science job opportunities. Most of the CALS career fairs had landscaping (or similar) companies, government companies, veterinary companies, and swine/poultry. Cattle, small ruminants, equine, and livestock production-based companies need more representation. I have struggled to find jobs related to this field (not that there is a lack of these jobs) and there are so many of us in the Animal Science department that would benefit from more representation in this area.

To truly elevate the undergraduate experience at NC State, the university should prioritize expanding access to professional work experiences, specifically co-ops and internships, particularly within engineering programs. While NC State offers strong academic foundations, there remains a critical opportunity to highlight better the transformative impact that practical industry experience can provide. Many engineering students may not fully grasp how significantly these experiences enhance their career readiness, professional network development, and competitive edge in the job market.

Health

Physical health resources, especially Carmichael Gym, were often cited as positive aspects of campus life.

The Carmichael's gym is another place I love the most. I can just go workout there and not think about anything else after a hard day of studying. So for me overall, being able to live a balanced life here had the most positive impact on my overall experience.

However, students frequently raised health concerns, such as those related to dining options, access to health care appointments, and environmental safety.

The living conditions in many of these buildings are not up to what I consider safe. ... As far as campus dining goes, I am sorry to say I was seriously underwhelmed and concerned. The foods we were served at orientation were hardly ever available during the semester.

I think NC state needs to take more seriously the concerns of faculty and staff and students who work in buildings that have tested positive for hazardous substances especially PCBs. There needs to be more transparency on what is considered safe exposure and where environmental tests have come back above the recommended EPA levels of safety for PCBs. ...

Academic Advising

While fewer than 10% of students highlighted academic advising as a positive, those who did emphasized the impact of supportive, knowledgeable advisors who helped them navigate their degrees and futures.

My academic advisors, [NAME] from the LSFY program and [NAME] from the Plant Biology (BS) program helped me tremendously. ... [NAME] helped me grow my connections with the research labs on campus, and he was always willing and very able to help me with practically any advising issue or even a few personal issues. My advisors are one of the main reasons I kept pursuing my degree. The academic connections I made through them and some of my high performances in my coursework helped my number of connections grow exponentially.

I think the thing that had the most positive impact on me was getting an advisor after changing majors which helped me navigate the rest of my time here at NCSU while also helping support my circumstances and goals for graduate school. This ultimately helped me find the career that I want to pursue by taking courses as a part of my major with the MLA program in the design school.

Students were slightly more likely to say advising needs improvement. They describe advisors as inexperienced, unknowledgeable, and more focused on their work as

professors. These students suggest that advisors have more training, better communication skills, and experience in the field.

Make sure advisors are trained and well-equipped. Some advisors do not know they can substitute courses in the degree audit, do not know the exact degree requirements and advise students to take the wrong courses, do not know what courses are easier vs demanding to recommend a good balance of classes for a student's semester for their best success, etc.

I don't have an academic advisor that knows me, or has the bandwidth to get to know me, enough to guide my academic and professional decisions. I know the [NAME OF DEPARTMENT] department is hiring more advisors, which is good, but the system needs to encourage more in person and personal interactions with advisors. I've experienced multiple instances of advising being incorrect, not knowing the answer to a question, or not responding to emails at all.

Mental Health

A smaller share of students mentioned mental health services as a positive, noting the impact of counseling, social support, and wellness days.

Having access to counseling and mental health services here at NC State had such an immense impact on my experience here... Being able to sit with a professional and talk through, analyze, and finally understand my own feelings was the push I needed in order to be more open with my parents, friends, and primary care doctors. I was able to greatly progress in my studies and feel comfortable with my personality and existence.

Wellness days are actually a much better idea than I originally gave them credit for. Encouraging students to take a break and go do an activity with friends should be encouraged.

However, students were three times more likely to identify support for mental health as an area needing improvement. Their concerns included how wellness days are scheduled, accessibility of counseling services, and lack of support from faculty and staff. They would like to see better communication and allocation of resources to support student mental health.

Emphasize the mental health resources-- when I went through orientation they were talked about so quickly I instantly forgot about them.

Better outreach to students. The high number of suicides was really jarring for a lot of students here, but I don't feel as though there was a ton of outreach to help students process that. Also, if a wellness day is offered, it shouldn't replace a reading day. Many students feel that is a bit counterproductive.

Provide more professional help services. I went through the CARES program during my Freshman year and it helped me more emotionally than I thought possible. The

mental health of students is extremely important and often it feels it is forgotten with the stress that classes and other parts of being in college can bring on. Having mental health resources readily available for all students is necessary to the undergraduate experience at NC State.

Personal Development

Just over 10% of students praised opportunities for personal growth, often through exposure to diverse perspectives, supportive programs, faculty and staff, and participation in organizations.

Being on campus and surrounded by diverse perspectives has pushed me to rethink my assumptions and see the world in new ways. It's shaped how I approach academic subjects, and ideas in general, making me more open-minded and thoughtful. The campus itself, as a space for learning and exchange, has been central to that growth, making my time here truly meaningful.

The Goodnight Scholars program. Being a part of this program has been a life-changing experience that has not only shaped my academic and professional aspirations but also helped me grow as an individual. The support received, both financial and personal, allowed me to focus on my education without the burden of financial stress. The resources, mentorship, and sense of community this program offers have been invaluable, empowering me to face challenges with confidence and determination. They invested in my potential and believed in my ability to make a positive impact and I will soon contribute to the legacy of excellence this program represents.

Few students mentioned personal development as an area for improvement.

Transportation

Transportation was rarely cited as a positive but frequently flagged as a problem. Students described expensive parking, disruptive construction, and unreliable buses as daily frustrations.

Commuting put an additional stress on me. The first semester I was unable to get a parking pass. After commuting an hour to a park-and-ride, I had to ride the bus, and depending on the bus schedule, it might take an additional 40 minutes to get to campus. As a result, I was spending approximately 3-4 hours every day just commuting. I think if there was some way to help reduce this stress for commuters, it could be beneficial.

The construction! It is seemingly impossible to get to class, there is always a pathway that I need to take that's blocked off, and it is loud and distracting during class

Housing

Housing was another area raised far more often as a challenge than a positive. Students pointed to crowded living conditions, poor sanitation, and difficulty securing housing after the first year. Students recommend a better system for matching students with their living environment and cohabitants, cleaner living conditions, and that more affordable housing is available.

As a freshman, staying in the dorms was not a pleasant experience. I was placed in one of the Tri-Towers, which housed 10 girls in one suite. This was very difficult for me as an introvert. I was able to make the social aspect of the living situation work for me. However, the living conditions in many of these buildings are not up to what I consider safe. ...

The Housing System should be revised. That has always been a big stressor and a barrier to attending NC State University. There needs to be more resources and information about options for housing available to students. It is very difficult to get a housing assignment on campus after freshman year, which you only find out through other students or, unfortunately, personal experience. Making this known so that students can make plans early enough to get nearby leases before they are gone by December is important. You can't attend the University if you have nowhere to live.