



CAFES 2008 New Student Survey Report

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Executive Summary

During Academic Day, September 2, 2008, incoming freshmen and transfer students in the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences (CAFES) were asked to complete a one-page questionnaire designed to find out:

- how they learned about UW-River Falls as an option for their tertiary education
- what factors most influenced their decision to come here
- what sorts of contact they had with the University prior to matriculating
- how committed they feel to UW-River Falls and their current major

A limited amount of demographic information was also collected. This report summarizes the 310 responses that were returned. Based on the approximately 420 freshmen and transfer students admitted to CAFES for Fall 2007, the estimates contained in this report should be accurate to within plus or minus 2.6 percent.

As was true when we did a similar survey in 2007, only slightly more than half (59%) reported that they grew up on a farm and relatively few (21%) are the first in their family to attend a university.

Word of mouth continues to be a major factor in our ability to attract students. The most important sources of information about UW-River Falls for our incoming students are their friends and family (71% learned about UWRF through them). The factor they listed as the most influential in their decision to attend this University is our reputation and quality of the programs (47% listed this as the most influential factor in their decision).

A subsequent, open-ended question, asked them to identify the sources of information that have influenced their opinions about the quality of programs at UW-River Falls. Nearly one-quarter (23%) said that family and friends helped form their opinions of our programs, 11% cited information gleaned from the internet, and 11% said their teachers and guidance counselors were influential.

The University of Wisconsin-River Falls continues to be effective in getting information about the University in front of perspective students. Comparable percentages of our students have visited our web site (68%), received our mailings (72%), and visited the campus (75%). Only 1 student reported receiving no communications from us! Wisconsin students (15%) are nearly twice as likely to report having received a UWRF mailing or brochure as those from Minnesota. Students from Minnesota are highly likely to have made a visit to our campus (86 percent); visiting the campus was cited as the factor that most influenced their decision to come to UW-River Falls by 22 percent of new students.

The results of this survey indicate that UW-River Falls was the first choice of colleges for most of the incoming class; 85% agreed or strongly agreed that this was true. Further, at least at the beginning of this semester, three-quarters agreed or strongly agreed that they would stick to their declared major. These two factors may help the University retain a higher than average proportion of these students.

The Background of CAFES' 2008 Entering Class

This is the second year in a row that the SRC has administered a survey to incoming students. As was true in 2007, CAFES students come from a variety of backgrounds and are much more likely to come from Wisconsin than is true for the University as a whole.

Somewhat more than half (59 percent) of all respondents reported that they grew up on a farm, which is slightly higher than last year's total of 54%. Similar to last year, new students in Plant and Earth Science majors were substantially more likely to have grown up somewhere other than a farm (55% of the 67 surveys returned by a PES major said they did not grow up on a farm). Horticulture (68%), Environmental Science (64%), and Conservation (57%) all attract a high percentage of students who did not grow up on a farm. In contrast, almost 90 percent of the Agricultural Economics majors reported having growing up on a farm, which was the highest percentage across the 5 departments. Last year, Agricultural Education majors held the top spot for percentage of new students who grew up on a farm.

Slightly less than half of the incoming 2008 class for the University as a whole are from Minnesota. In contrast, less than one-third (28%) of the CAFES' 2008 entering class are from Minnesota, 69 percent are from Wisconsin, and 3 percents are from other states (California, Nevada, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Missouri). This data is similar to the data presented for the 2007 new students.

Traditionally, nearly 60% of all students at UW-River Falls are the first in their family to go to college. In contrast, less than one-quarter (21%) of the 2008 incoming class for CAFES reported that no one else in their family had gone to college.

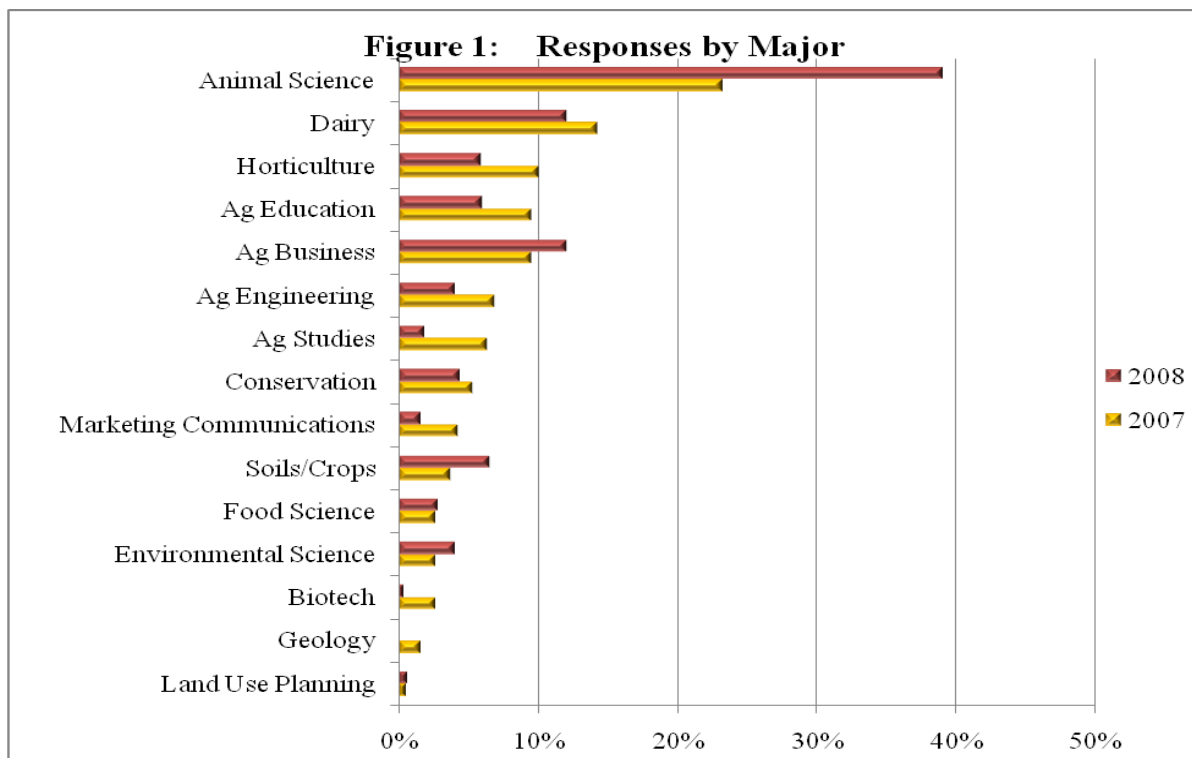
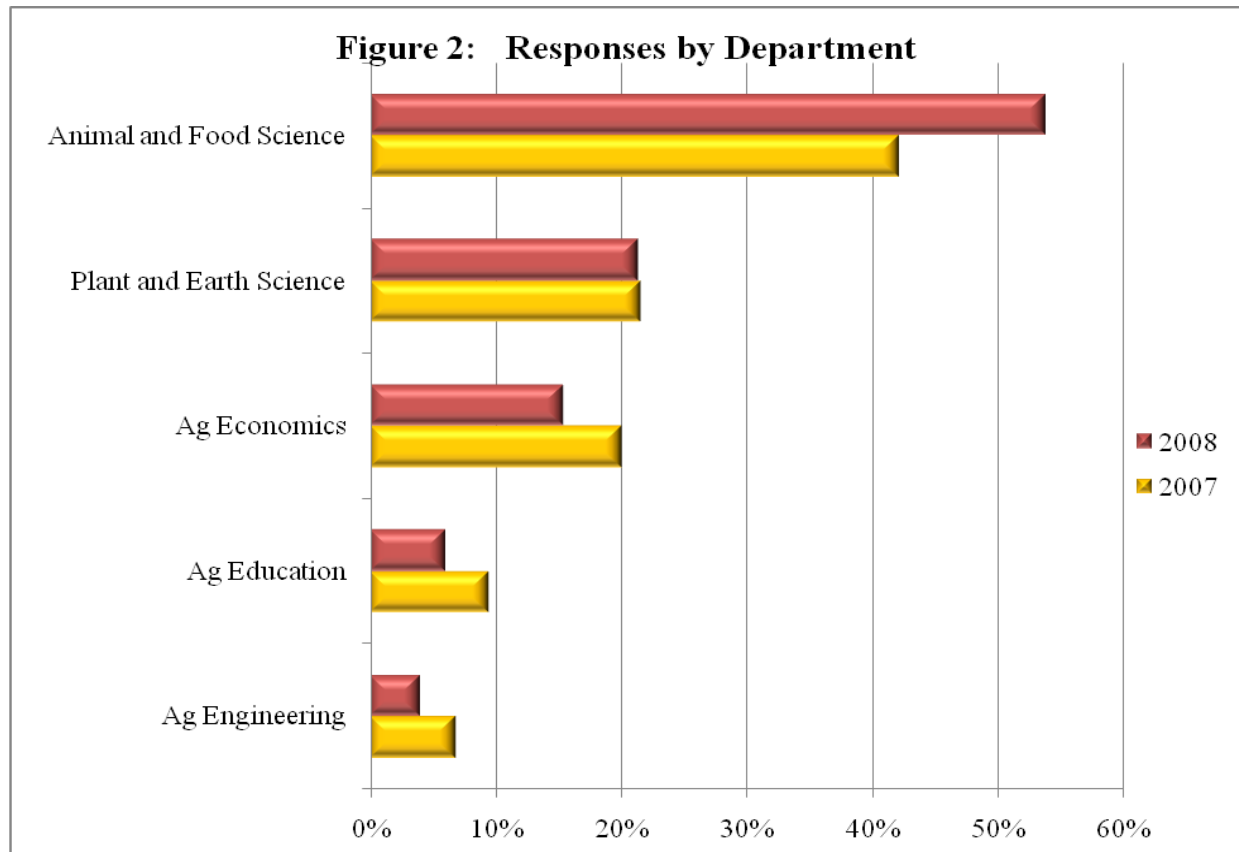


Figure 1 provides a break-down of the 310 entering CAFES students who returned their questionnaire this year as compared to the 190 new students from 2007. Like last year, Animal Science and Dairy majors constitute a high percentage of CAFES' new students. Together they account for more than half of the new students in the College (Figure 2). This year, though their percentage of the total CAFES incoming class fell, the number of Agricultural Business majors equals the number of new Dairy Science majors.



How Did the Incoming Class Learn about UW-River Falls?

Students were given seven specific means by which they might have heard of UW-River Falls plus an “other” category and could check all that applied. Table 1 indicates that, as was true in the 2007 survey, the most frequently used source of information about UW-River Falls is family and friends.

Table 1 indicates that high school teachers and guidance counselors are also quite influential; they were cited as a source of information about UWRF by about one-third of incoming students. Students who grew up in Wisconsin were significantly more likely to report learning of UW-River Falls from a teacher or guidance counselor than those from Minnesota or other states. This result suggests that the College needs to do a better job of raising our profile with teachers and guidance counselors in Minnesota.

Print media (mailings from UWRF) and electronic media (web search) were equally important to this incoming class in terms of learning about our College.

Three “other” reasons of note were given as to how students found out about UW-River Falls: FFA, booth at an event (such as a college fair), and through industry professionals (farrier, riding instructor, for example).

Table 1: How did you learn about UW-River Falls?		
	2008 Percent Using	2007 Percent Using
Count	310	190
Family/Friends	71%	68%
Teacher/Guidance Counselor	33%	31%
Live Nearby	18%	22%
Web Search	16%	16%
Mailing from UWRF	12%	15%
UWRF Visit to my High School	5%	10%
Advertisement	1%	2%

Incoming students who grew up on a farm were slightly more likely to have learned about UW-River Falls from a family member or friend. Those same students were also much less likely to have heard about UW-River Falls from a teacher or guidance counselor.

Overall the data in Table 1 are very similar to the responses of 2007 incoming students.

What Most Influence Their Choice to Come to UW-River Falls

Incoming students were asked to identify the single factor that most influenced their decision to come to UW-River Falls. Because many students included multiple responses, the question was analyzed as though students could choose as many as they wished. To make this year’s analysis comparable with the 2007 data, we re-edited last year’s data to allow for multiple answers. This change means that the percentages in Table 2 sum to more than 100%.

As was true in 2007, incoming students said that the reputation and quality of our programs was, by far, the most important factor in choosing to come to UWRF. Almost half of the 2008 respondents said this was one of the most important factors in their decision.

Because CAFES’ reputation was also the most important factor in the 2007 survey, the SRC asked an open-ended follow-up question that read, “What sources of information have influenced your opinion about the quality of UW-River Falls programs?” Only 48 of the 310 respondents did not answer this question and many identified multiple sources of information that helped form their opinion of UWRF.

The factors that seem to have most influenced opinions about our programs parallel how students report hearing about us: family/friends/UWRF-alumni (identified by 30% of all respondents), electronic media (11%), and teachers/guidance counselors/vo-ag teachers (11%). Other factors listed by our incoming students include campus visits (9%), interactions with current students (8%), print media they received from UWRF (8%), their knowledge that we offer majors in which they are interested (6%), interaction with faculty and staff (5%), and various other factors (generic word of mouth, extracurricular opportunities we offer, the size and beauty of the campus, etc.). These results don't identify any single strategy we might pursue as a College to ensure that our reputation remains strong. Rather, our reputation is likely to continue to be based on:

- the care with which we handle interactions with our alumni
- the quality of the experience we provide to our current students
- building/maintaining strong relations with guidance counselors, vo-ag teachers and high school teachers in related disciplines
- building and maintaining an informative and easy to navigate website
- ensuring our achievements are duly noted in the statewide agricultural papers and in the local and regional newspapers as well

Table 2: Most Influential Factor in Choosing to Come to UW-River Falls		
	2008	2007
Count	310	136
Reputation/Quality	47%	40%
Campus Visit	22%	18%
Friends/Students at UWRF	17%	19%
Parents/Family	14%	11%
Location/Distance from home	19%	16%
Size of Campus	24%	13%
Other	9%	7%
Teacher/Guidance Counselor	7%	8%
Web Site Info	5%	2%
Turned Down by First Choice	3%	2%
Contact with Faculty	2%	1%
Financial aid received	3%	1%

What Contact Did Students Have with UWRF Prior to Their Arrival

Table 3, which summarizes incoming students' responses with respect to the types of contact they had from UW-River Falls prior to their arrival, indicates that the University has been very successful in attracting students for a campus visit. More than three-quarters of all incoming students said they had

visited campus prior to their move to River Falls. Since the campus visit was the third most frequently mentioned factor that sold them on the University, the increase in campus visits is a very positive outcome.

Slightly more than three quarters of all students who completed the survey remembered receiving a mailing from UW-River Falls and nearly as many said they visited our website. The proportion of students who remembered receiving a mailing was up compared than last year, as was the percentage of students who visited the website. With respect to our website, Table 2 indicated that less than 5 percent said that the information on the website was one of the most influential factors in their decision to come to UW-River Falls. This suggests that, while the website is not the determining factor with respect to the choice of college, it is still a very important source of information for current and future entering students.

Table 3: What contacts did you have with UW-River Falls prior to arrival (percent yes)		
	2008	2007
Count	310	190
Campus Visit	78%	74%
Mailing	75%	68%
Website	70%	62%
Phone Calls	23%	26%
Fac. Meeting	19%	18%
Attended Campus Activity	N/A	17%
Other	5%	4%

On average, the typical incoming student reported having contact with the University via 3 of the methods listed in Table 3. Only 1 of the 310 (1%) responses reported that they had not been contacted by any of the means listed in Table 3. Twenty-two students listed 5 or more different modes of contact (7%). Last year, 2 of the 190 respondents reported no contact while 16 selected 5 or more different modes of contact.

There are no statistically significant differences between students with different demographic profiles and the types of contacts they reported having with the University prior to arrival. This means, for example, that incoming students who grew up on a farm or in Minnesota were no more (or less) likely to have visited campus than students with non-farm backgrounds or those from Wisconsin. In contrast, there were 5 statistically significant differences in the 2007 data. Most of the 2007 differences had to do with the state of residence; in 2007, Minnesota students were significantly more likely to have received information from the web, to have visited campus and to have met with a faculty or staff member but less likely to have been on campus for an FFA or other high school event and to report having received a mailing from the University.

However, students from different majors appear to have had somewhat different experiences with respect to contacts with the University.

- Dairy Science majors are much more likely to have contact with the college through mailings/brochures than other students
- Ag Engineering and Horticulture majors are much more likely to have had a campus visit, while Food Science majors were much less likely to have visited the campus

- Animal Science and Dairy Science majors were less likely to have had a personal meeting with a faculty or staff member than those of other majors
- Ag Business majors were more likely to have selected 'other' as a method of contact with the university. The written results returned from these students include: "mother taught here," "came here for convention," and "family and friends/current students."

Overall, the University seems to be doing a fairly good job of getting our information out to potential students. Last year, one of the recommendations was to work harder to get students from Wisconsin and those who did not grow up on a farm to come for a campus visit and to increase the proportion of Wisconsin students who visit our website. Last year, only 14 percent of students from Wisconsin had visited the campus prior to arrival as compared to almost three quarters this year. There has also been an increase in the percentage of students who grew up on a farm who visited the campus prior to matriculation. It appears that there has been a definite improvement in the ability to get information to potential students.

Retention Dimensions

Incoming students were asked four questions that indicate their level of attachment to our University and our College and their level of participation in activities. The level of attachment and participation might be expected to influence the likelihood that they will remain at UW-River Falls until they graduate and take an active role in campus organizations. As has been true throughout this report, there are few dramatic differences between the 2007 and 2008 data.

Table 4: Potential Indicators of Attachment to UWRF, 2008 and 2007							
		Count	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
UWRF was first choice	2008	303	56%	29%	11%	3%	1%
	2007	188	56%	30%	10%	4%	1%
I'll stick with current major	2008	306	32%	42%	23%	2%	0%
	2007	187	30%	44%	21%	3%	2%
I'll transfer from UWRF	2008	302	1%	6%	15%	40%	38%
	2007	189	1%	3%	15%	39%	42%
I was involved in lots of high school activities	2008	304	31%	37%	23%	7%	2%
	2007	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

As in 2007, nearly 9 out of 10 students either agreed (29%) or strongly agreed (56%) that UW-River Falls was their first choice of colleges. Only 4% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. At least for students in CAFES, UWRF is pretty clearly their first choice for college. Wisconsin students (87%)

were slightly more likely to say that UW-River Falls was their first choice compared to Minnesotans (80%). The percentage of Minnesotans who said UWRF was their first choice increased from 73 percent last year.

Respondents' commitment to their current major is lower than their commitment to UWRF; slightly less than 3 out of 4 said they expect to stick with their current major and almost one-quarter were neutral on this topic. As was the case last year, this year's students in the agricultural economics department (agricultural business, marketing communications, and ag studies) stand out as significantly less certain of their major than those in other departments – 43% were neutral or disagreed that they would keep their major, which is 15 percentage points higher than any other department. Attachment to the current major is particularly weak among agricultural studies and environmental science students; a little over half are either neutral toward their major or disagree that they will stick with it. Many agricultural studies students view the major as a place to be until they determine the specific discipline they want to pursue, so the relatively weak commitment to that major is not surprising.

Perhaps the only red flag in Table 4 is that the number who “agreed” that they expect to transfer from UW-River Falls doubled from 3% to 6%. Students with majors in animal science (11.2%), food science (11.1%) and environmental science management (9.1%), those who did not grow up on a farm (11.6%), and those who are not the first in their family to go to college (9.3%) were substantially more likely to report that they expect to transfer from UWRF. It should be also be noted that 80% of this year's incoming students disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would likely transfer from UWRF.

Finally, in a new question, students were asked if they were involved in high school activities, such as sports, clubs, or volunteer activities. Studies have shown that students who are engaged with clubs and other extracurricular activities are more likely to be retained at college. Implicitly, we are assuming that if our incoming students were active in high school extracurricular activities, they will also be active at UWRF. More than two-thirds of all incoming students either agreed or strongly agreed that they were active in high school. Students who grew up on a farm were much more likely to be involved in activities in high school. This high percentage may, possibly, be linked to activities such as 4-H or FFA. Historically, CAFES retention rates have been higher than for the university as a whole, the results of this survey suggest that they may continue to be high.

Conclusions

The data collected during the 2008 Academic Day largely confirm the results from the 2007 survey. The results indicate that our college continues to attract a large number of students who did not grow up on a farm and that, compared to the university as a whole, we attract a high proportion of students from throughout Wisconsin.

These data again confirm that word of mouth is a key factor in terms of convincing students to come to UWRF. What they hear from family and friends and what they perceive as our reputation for high quality programs are of paramount importance in their decision. There is a certain circularity in that the key sources of information about UWRF are friends and family. The importance of our reputation suggests

that CAFES continue to aggressively publicize our successes, provide current students with a first class experience and cultivate our alumni.

Overall, it appears that we have been successful in getting information about UW-River Falls in the hands of these students. Only 1 of 310 students reported that they received no contacts from the University. Last year, a suggestion was to work on marketing to Minnesota students. This year, Minnesota students, on average, had more contacts with the University than Wisconsin students or students from other states. There are, still, a higher number of students from Wisconsin attending CAFES. This may be because there is a built-in recruiting advantage in Wisconsin provided by the large number of high school teachers and other alumni throughout rural Wisconsin.

By and large, our students are here because they want to be – UW-River Falls was their first choice of colleges and they are relatively strongly committed to their major. Historically, students in CAFES have had higher retention rates and the commitment to the University and commitment to their major would be expected to support relatively high retention rates.

The consistency of the results in 2007 and 2008 support the accuracy of the snapshot we have taken of our incoming classes. There are several reasons to be optimistic about the retention rates of these students who upon graduation, we hope will be as good at recruiting the next generation of students as our current alumni have been with this one.