

# President and Provost on Students Speak

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John Anderson, President of the Illinois Institute of Technology, does not fear change. “I think you should take every opportunity to figure out what people think, what could be done better. But I think human nature is such that people don’t like to be evaluated, especially by students.” This is what makes the Students Speak survey so significant. It’s certainly one of a very rare breed; a comprehensive, university-wide survey of students’ impressions of IIT departments, organized and run by students.

TechNews had the opportunity to discuss the survey results, preliminary action plans, general impressions, and the future of the survey with the President and Provost, and following are some key points from our discussion.

## What are you happiest about with the the survey? Any initial reactions?

President Anderson: I’m happy that it’s a student-run initiative. I mean, we hired Dr. Fisher to hold it together because students have a full-time job of studying and all that, and we need somebody to work with the educational statistics and survey, but I think it’s important that it’s basically student-run. I want it to always stay that way.

Provost Cramb: I would add that I think it was 88% of the students felt safe on campus, and that’s very good. It’s an issue that everyone’s safe, and I’m not quite sure you’d get 88% at DePaul in Lincoln Park, to be honest. I walk through the campus every day, I live around there. I think that’s important, because it’s a different view of our campus, and it’s something that many people wouldn’t know. People think anything on the South Side has to be terrible, and we’re showing that’s simply not true. So to me, that’s what I thought was really important - that our students feel they’re safe.

## Within the academic [departments] specifically - how do you feel about how the different colleges did?

Provost Cramb: I thought it was interesting that the new School of Applied Technology has been treating their students really well. They have a widely dispersed student body: part-time, full-time, across campuses, and they

come out on top. So I think that’s a message to everyone else, that you really have to be more student-focused. I also noticed that some of the bigger departments have more problems, and maybe you’d expect that, but that’s the discussion that the faculty and undergraduate affairs people have been having - that we have to do better mentoring, better advising. It’s all part of that. It’s also interesting to compare to other surveys, that when you’ve got the academic side, that the issues of the university aren’t with teaching, aren’t with the faculty. I’m really happy that the results came out that we find our faculty are accessible. I thought there were a lot of positives.

## You mentioned Princeton review. How does this compare to that?

Provost Cramb: There are some things in there that are serious. For example, we have a lot of students who would not recommend the university, and the majority of students would, but there’s still a significant number, about 30%, that wouldn’t. And if you look at that, that’s a problem.

President Anderson: I think that number’s not uncommon, because you only try one university. Typically students only go to one; you’re in it, you see all the flaws, you see it’s not delivering on everything, and so you think it must be better somewhere else. It’s like family [laughs]; when you’ve just got the one, other families might look really good.

## It seems one of the main reasons for that number is the high cost here. What reaction did you have to that?

Provost Cramb: We’ve had this discussion often. When we talk with students about cost, they don’t look at total - you know, people say “I can share an apartment in Bridgeport, and it’d be much cheaper with six of us sharing a place.” And when you say “what about getting three of you in a dorm here?” they recoil. But I can understand the mindset. I lived in student housing when I was a student, too, and I remember my expectations.

President Anderson: I think that tuition here is low. You know that, and you could publish it. I just went to a couple of websites over the weekend, looked up another engineering college - \$38,000 tuition, \$8,000 rooms. Our rooms are, what, \$6,500? And the dining cost was huge, too. And this is what Brian Kibbe



did a couple of years ago: you can go on the websites of private schools you think are comparable (not public - there you’ll have a 25:1 student-faculty ratio, and here we’re at 9:1), and you’ll see that we’re low on everything. And we’re in the middle of a city, where costs are high. We still need good service, because for what you’re paying, we need to demand that. There’s no excuse for poor maintenance.

## Was there any part of this survey you were surprised to see? Was there something you expected to do well that didn’t, or vice versa?

President Anderson: I was very happy with the Bursar’s Office. It’s a real success story from the last survey to this one.

Provost Cramb: I was happy to see housing improve, but I was disappointed that it didn’t improve more.

President Anderson: It’s still pretty low, but that’s something that we have to work on. We can’t improve service overnight. It involves money, but it’s also a process. I do get irritated when someone promises service overnight and nothing happens. If someone tells me “we’ll get to this in three weeks,” I can accept that. But if I don’t get any feedback, I hate it. I’m on the side of the students with that.

## Is there anywhere outside of our school where the survey is making a splash?

President Anderson: [University of] Michigan is very interested, and we have a few others. I have to say that I haven’t seen a buzz, though. I think with this, it’s going to be rejected by a lot of vice presidents at universities. They say “we do our own surveys.” Well, their surveys don’t get the same results that a student survey does.

Provost Cramb: This process gives up control of the survey to the students, and a lot of people are very uncomfortable with it.

President Anderson: I remember going to a staff function at the Bog the first year, and I got attacked by several staff. “Students are going to kill us, it’s going to be a witch hunt!” But it’s not that, it’s not a witch hunt. I mean, I found out that we’ve got someone in the dining halls who’s an angel.

**Doris!**

She’s wonderful. You find out there are people who have these spectacular relation-

ships with the students.

## Now that the results are out, what’s going to happen? What are the priorities, what are we going to see happen in the coming semester or even beyond?

Provost Cramb: Well, I think that getting all the improvement plans from the different units is the next step. Then just following up with the improvement plans and making sure there’s still improvement.

President Anderson: We’ve been thinking about next year’s survey being a little different. If we just keep doing the same thing, it might get old. I don’t want to hear about 7-11 again [laughs]. I think we want to follow up on some units and make sure they’re still improving, but we’re thinking about having three or four major issues discussed. The students are going to come up with these, but rather than questions clustered around specific offices, you’d have general functions.

Provost Cramb: I think the president had a really interesting idea, and that was giving students a few options and having them pick what they want to see. It would be good to have the student view of, for example, having better wireless across campus versus having a better hard-line connection in the dorms.

President Anderson: We have to make choices all the time. I call it “this or that.” I was at a meeting a while ago with a professor from Princeton [University], and they were starting something like this. “Do you want this dining hall open more hours or this other thing? We can’t do both.”

Provost Cramb: It costs money either way, so what are the trade-offs on these things? That would be another option for Students Speak. I think questions like that would provide meaningful results, and it would be a very good lesson for students to be making those choices.

President Anderson: The suggestion for keeping the library open 24/5 was a great suggestion.

Provost Cramb: Significant cost implications, but students love it. If we’re going to spend an extra \$150,000 a year, should it have been done there or somewhere else?

Anderson: I don’t want students there [at Galvin] on Saturday night [laughs]. Lock the doors on Friday and Saturday nights - it’s the weekend, have some fun.

