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Leaving College: Why Students Withdrew from a University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons why students withdrew during a semester from a mid-sized, comprehensive university located in the Midwest. Six hundred forty-five students were asked to complete the ACT "Withdrawing/Non-returning Student Survey" during the 1992-93 academic year and summer semester. Three hundred sixty-five completed surveys were returned for a 57% response rate.

Respondents indicated many different reasons for leaving which varied by year in school and whether or not the respondent was a graduate or undergraduate student. There was no typical withdrawing student and there were many reasons students withdrew over which the university has little or no control. The report concludes with a discussion of Vincent Tinto's (1993) ideas concerning institutional departure.

The retention and persistence of students in higher education has been the focus of serious intellectual inquiry for many years. Various concepts of institutional departure, persistence and models for programmatic interventions to reduce departure have been developed. (For example, see Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Stage & Rushin, 1993; Steele, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Wolfe, 1993.) The purpose of this study was to focus on one aspect of student attrition, and to investigate the reasons and general trends as to why students withdrew during a semester from a midsized comprehensive university located in the Midwest. This information could then be used to guide institutional action.

METHOD

The ACT "Withdrawing/Non-returning Student Survey" (The American College Testing Program, 1993) was used as the data collection instrument. It is divided into five sections: (a) background information, (b) reasons for leaving this college, (c) satisfaction with college services and characteristics, (d) institution-specific optional

questions (none were used in this study), and (e) space for written comments and suggestions. The Office of Student Life distributed the survey to all students who withdrew during the 1992-93 academic year and the 1993 summer semester. According to university policy, students were required to contact the Office of Student Life to withdraw from the university. Students who visited the office to withdraw were asked to complete the survey there. Students who informed the office by phone of their intent to withdraw were mailed the survey and were asked to return it to the office. All students were told that completing the questionnaire was part of the usual withdrawal process. The sample of students surveyed did not include students who completed a semester and then did not return for the next semester. The students surveyed were those students who withdrew from the university during the semesters indicated.

During the 1992-93 academic year, approximately 16,000 students were enrolled at the university. A total of 645 students contacted the Office of Student Life and withdrew from the university during the semesters studied. Two hundred eighty-nine students withdrew during fall semester, 239 students withdrew during spring semester, and 117 students withdrew during the summer semester. Of these, 365 completed surveys were returned for a 57% response rate. Although statistics were not recorded, staff observed that students who were mailed the survey were less likely to complete and return it than those students who were asked to complete the survey while they were at the office.

RESULTS

Respondents were 52% female and 48% male. Most respondents were enrolled full-time (77%), white (85%), single (84%), and classified themselves as an in-state student (96%). Respondents were 19% freshman, 17% sophomores, 23% juniors, 22% seniors, 13% graduate students, and 7% were either special students, other, or chose not to respond to the question. Students lived in various locations while attending the university: 32% in a residence hall, 31% in a room or apartment, 17% in their own home, 12% in a parent's home, 4% in married housing, 3% in other accommodations, and 1% in a fraternity or sorority house.

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Immediately prior to attending the university, 45% had attended high school, 25% a two-year college, 23% a four-year college, 3% a graduate/professional college, and 1% a vocational/technical school. Withdrawing students had various plans for the coming year: 30% planned to obtain a job, 24% planned to obtain a job and enroll in college, 23% planned to enroll in college, 10% had other plans, 3% had home and family obligations, 5% were undecided, and 5% left the question blank. Forty-eight percent of respondents planned to re-enroll at the university, 27% were undecided, and 25% indicated they did not plan to re-enroll at the university.

REASONS FOR LEAVING

Students had 48 different choices to respond to as to why they left the university. They were asked to indicate each possible choice as a "major reason," "minor reason" or "not a reason." Response options were organized into categories of personal, academic, institutional, financial, and employment. Students were also asked what was their single most important reason for leaving.

The combined major and minor reasons for leaving listed by 20% or more of the student-respondents included health related problem, either family or personal (33%), experienced emotional problems (32%), dissatisfied with my grades (29%), decided to attend another college (28%), wanted a break from college studies (26%), conflicts between demands of job and college (26%), inadequate study habits (23%), encountered unexpected expenses (22%), and wanted to move or was transferred to a new location (21%). Other reasons for leaving were tuition and fees were more than I could afford (19%), wanted to live nearer to my parents or relatives (17%), wanted to get work experience (17%), family responsibilities were too great (16%), felt alone or isolated (15%), accepted a full-time job (15%), experienced class scheduling problems (15%), commuting distance to this college was too great (13%), courses were too difficult (13%) disappointed with the quality of instruction at this college (13%), difficulty in obtaining transportation to this college (10%), influenced by parents or relatives (10%), too many required courses (10%), did not budget my money wisely (10%), and could not find part-time work at this college (10%).

REASONS WHY NOT RE-ENROLLING

Forty-one percent of the withdrawing freshmen respondents did not plan to return to the university. This compares to 30% for sophomores, 16% for juniors, 17% for seniors and 13% for graduate students. Having no definite goal in mind for attending the university was

reported by 23% percent of the students who did not plan to re-enroll, 27% of withdrawing freshmen and 16% of sophomores. This compares to 8% for juniors, 0% for seniors and graduate students, and 10% of the total respondents.

Attending another college was a major or minor reason for withdrawing for many freshmen (56%) and sophomores (40%), while this was reported by fewer juniors (22%), seniors (10%) and graduate students (8%). Of the undergraduates who planned not to re-enroll at the university, 38% indicated wanting to live closer to parents or loved ones as a major or minor reason for withdrawing. The same reason was found for 41% of freshmen, 34% of sophomores and 41% of withdrawing residence hall residents. In comparison, only 10% of juniors, 6% of seniors and 4% of graduate students who withdrew indicated that living nearer to parents or loved ones was a major or minor reason for their leaving.

Twenty-four percent of the undergraduates who planned not to re-enroll at the university indicated that their desired major not being offered was a major or minor reason for withdrawing. In comparison, when considering all withdrawing students, 9% of students overall, 17% of freshmen, 11% of sophomores, 9% of juniors, 3% of seniors and 4% of graduate students reported this was a major or minor reason for withdrawing. Fifty-four percent of withdrawing graduate students and 30% of withdrawing seniors indicated that conflict between job and college was a major or minor reason for leaving. This compares to 13% for freshmen, 21% for sophomores and 22% for juniors. Seventy percent of withdrawing graduate students planned to obtain a job in the coming year compared to 20-27% of the withdrawing undergraduate students.

DISCUSSION

The data summarized in this report is from one institution and study results may not be generalizable to other institutions. The findings do, however, suggest that students withdraw from a university during a semester for many different reasons. There is no typical withdrawing student and there are many reasons students withdraw over which the university has little or no control. Forty-eight percent of respondents planned to re-enroll at the university, 27% were undecided, and 25% indicated that they did not plan to re-enroll. Some planned communication specific to each group of students is warranted. Those students who plan to re-enroll at the university and students who are undecided about their plans could be contacted and appropriate assistance offered. Exit interviews or other follow-up with students who do not plan to

return to the university could help in understanding the decision making process of these students.

Since some student withdrawal is normal and natural, institutions of higher education need to clarify what is normal attrition and in what areas action needs to be taken. Colleges and universities need to focus their thinking about retention and work to reduce that student withdrawal which can be prevented, while facilitating student withdrawal that is normal and natural to the college setting. This study focused on students who withdrew from a university during a semester. Further studies should examine student withdrawal between semesters.

TINTO AND STUDENT DEPARTURE

In his 1993 book *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition, Second Edition*, Vincent Tinto argues that student departure is a complex phenomenon. He identifies the following types of student departure: departure of persons from individual institutions (institutional departure), and departure from the wider system (system departure). Some students who leave transfer to other institutions of higher learning (immediate transfer), some leave higher education altogether (system departure), while others temporarily withdraw from the system (stopouts). Some stopouts return to their original institution (institutional stopouts), while others enroll in another institution (delayed transfer) (Tinto, 1993, p.8).

Some forms of student departure are expected and benefit the student, others may be problematic and necessitate institutional response. Tinto's theory focuses on the role institutions play in influencing the social and intellectual development of their students and "...stresses both the limits of institutional action and the unique responsibility institutions share in the education of their students" (Tinto, 1993, pp. 3-4). Tinto argues that if the term "dropout" is used at all it "...should be strictly limited to a very narrow range of student departures, namely,

to those situations where the implied notion of failure can be reasonably applied to both the individual and the institution...

[He suggests] "...that retention should not be the ultimate goal of institutional action, though it may be a desirable outcome of institutional efforts. Instead, institutions and students would be better served if a concern for the education of students, their social and intellectual growth, were the guiding principle of institutional action. When that goal is achieved, enhanced student retention will naturally follow...[T]he first step institutions should take in confronting the problem of student dropout is the specification of institutional educational goals... Goal clarification enables educators to come to grips with the...question of which types of departure among which types of students are to be the object of institutional action and which are to be considered the natural outcome of institutional functioning. (Tinto, 1993, pp 4-5).

Institutions of higher education must determine what types of institutional action are appropriate for the various types of student withdrawal. Then specific plans for appropriate action can be made. ■

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