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CAMPUS LEAVING BEHAVIOR

Why do students decide to leave their universities? For financial reasons? Because of bad advising? Or do they just need some "time out"? This study, conducted at Florida State University, attempts to identify the reasons for students' leaving behavior and has come up with some interesting results, leading to the identification of three distinct models of leaving behavior. The article concludes with a brief section that discusses how the findings in the study have implications for advising.

INTRODUCTION

Exactly why an individual student elects to leave a particular campus is an area of interest to many people in higher education. Despite this attention, researchers have been unable to agree on the different types of leaving behavior (Avakian, MacKinney, & Allen, 1982). Literature supports the importance of finances in the decision to withdraw from school (Tinto, 1982; Iwai & Churchill, 1982; Pantages & Creedon, 1978), yet the phenomenon of the student leaving higher education due to financial problems has been labeled a myth by Lee Noel. Noel (1985) asserts that if everything at the institution were satisfactory, the student would find some means of remaining in the school. It seems the conflict arises in defining what is a "financial reason" for withdrawal. The definition of "financial reasons" is confused by the interaction of actual finances with the perception of the value of the educational experience being offered at the institution. Students may withdraw for "financial reasons" even though there is no change in their financial situation—the benefit of the educational experience offered is no longer worth the money required to continue. Thus a report of a financial reason for withdrawal may indicate true financial need or a devaluing of the entire educational program in the eyes of that student. Both could legitimately be called a "financial'reason," but each requires a different response from the institution.

A change in the valuing of an education at a particular institution often results in the student finding a "better deal" at another campus. This decision to transfer, therefore, needs to be addressed as an issue related to the decision to withdraw (Tinto, 1982).

Common practice is to consider the transfer of a student as some form of institutional or student failure (Tinto, 1985). Yet that decision may not be an indication of poor performance on the part either of the student or of the institution (Lea, Sedlacek, & Stewart, 1979). While the decision to transfer appears to be a significant factor in why students leave an institution (Bean, 1982), most research tends to look at transfer students as a population they receive (Avakian, MacKinney, & Allen, 1982; Pantages & Creedon, 1978). It is clear that the transferring student is a special case of attrition and merits closer investigation (Moore, 1981).

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Many institutions rely upon self reports to gather data on why their students leave their campus. While this is the most common method, it may or may not be a valid source (Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Turner, 1983; Irvine, 1985; Jourites & O'Leary, 1985). It appears that self assessments are subject to a variety of confounding factors (Haley, 1985; Wolf and Savickas, 1985). The use of self reports in the area of retention research can still be useful; however, the interpretation of results becomes complex. Interpretation takes on two levels, the student's perception of reality and then reality itself. Increasing financial aid may or may not be the appropriate response to a report of financial need. Solutions targeted at the student's perception of the problem may fail because they do not address the real issues facing the student. The context of a response should help determine the reality underneath self-reported retention data.

PROCEDURE

This study was conducted on the campus of Florida State University. Many of the students who leave this campus do not go through the formal withdrawal process, but simply fail to register for the next semester. Those "disappearing" students assigned to the Division of Undergraduate Studies (which has academic responsibility for most freshmen and sophomores) are contacted by mail and asked to complete a survey. These data have been collected over the course of several years and used mainly to address the needs and questions of individual students.

GOALS

The data analysis in the present study was undertaken to accomplish several goals. The first was to present a general picture of why students leave the campus. This information will be used to help assess our overall academic environment and prompt ideas for further research. Financial reasons for withdrawal were to be analyzed closely. It was hoped that a distinction could be made between true financial need and a lowering of the value placed on the educational experience being offered. A related issue commanding additional attention was the factors behind a decision to attend a different institution.

SUBJECTS

The subjects in the study were all students assigned to the Division of Undergraduate Studies from 1983 to 1986 who failed to register from one semester to the next (excluding summer term). The majority of these students were freshmen and sophomores, although a small number were juniors assigned to the Division. (The juniors in Undergraduate Studies are usually undecided about their future educational plans or are making a second attempt to gain admission to a highly competitive degree program.)

It should be noted that these subjects include students who officially withdrew from the institution as well as students who simply failed to re-enroll. Students dismissed for academic reasons were not included in .the study. By removing academic failure as an issue, the investigator limited the population to students who made a conscious, self-motivated decision to leave the institution.

INSTRUMENT

The survey is a simple instrument listing 18 reasons for withdrawal and asking the student to rank them in the order of importance in their decision to leave the campus. The following reasons were listed:

1. financial reasons
2. offered a scholarship at another school
3. needed time out from school
4. illness
5. bad advising
6. needed at home
7. undecided about my major
8. parents moved
9. campus too impersonal
10. dissatisfaction with my academic performance
11. entered the armed forces
12. major not offered here
13. accepted a job
14. could not get desired courses
15. got married
16. attending a vocational or technical school
17. attending a new school
18. contributing factors

Students identifying "contributing factors" were asked to explain the nature of these factors. Students identifying that they would be attending a different institution were asked to name their new school, thereby allowing the identification of the school by location and type. All subjects were asked if they planned to return to the campus at some point in the future. The data from this survey were matched with the students' academic records to ascertain sex, class, and official GPA.

DATA ANALYSIS

Frequency distributions were used to describe the overall picture of why students leave the campus. Correlations were calculated using the Chi-squared statistic and the contingency coefficient where variables involved nominal data. Kendall's Tau was used to correlate the ordinal rankings. Kendall's Tau was used as opposed to Spearman's Rho due to the large number of observations that were ranked into a relatively small number of categories (N. Nie, C. Hull, J. Jenkins, K. Steinbrenner, & D. Bent, 1975). Only correlations at the p. 01 level were considered.

RESULTS

Over the course of six semesters, a total of 1,589 surveys were mailed. This represents approximately 5% of the total lower division enrollment each semester. Of those surveys mailed, 51 were returned as address unknown. Failure to rank the responses eliminated an additional 109 responses. The remaining 502 subjects who returned the survey constituted a 31% usable sample of the population. Males accounted for 45% of the sample, a percentage not significantly different from either the sample of withdrawn students or the campus as a whole. Freshmen constituted 44% of the sample, a percentage that also reflects the distribution of the population and the campus.

The survey's request to rank the reasons for withdrawal was met with a variety of responses. Most students ranked three or four of the available reasons. A few students ranked as many as nine, while a limited number ranked all 18 possible reasons. The analysis of the

data was limited to the top four reasons as ranked by the subjects. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of these responses.

Many of the students identified "contributing factors" as a reason for their withdrawal. The explanation provided most often referred to a general dissatisfaction with the campus (35%). Nineteen percent used this response to indicate the atypical nature of their financial or family problem. Personal or emotional problems accounted for 17% of these responses. Homesickness was cited by 15% and geographic preference explained the remaining 13%. "Contributing factors" was not positively correlated with any of the other factors.

Table 1
Reason for Withdrawing Response Distribution

Reason for Withdrawal	Number	Percent
financial reasons	177	15%
accepted at a new school	158	13%
contributing factors	153	13%
needed time out	105	9%
dissatisfied with academic performance	77	6%
needed at home	71	6%
impersonal campus	63	5%
bad academic advising	54	4%
accepting a job	51	4%
undecided about major	38	3%
parents moved	37	3%
major not offered	35	3%
illness	34	3%
could not get desired courses	29	2%
getting married	24	2%
accepted a scholarship at a new school	12	1%
joined the armed forces	8	1%
attending a vocational or technical school	7	1%

Needing time out from studies was also a popular response. High rankings of this factor were positively correlated to the following:

undecided about major	Tau = .3309	p. 01
dissatisfaction with academic performance	Tau = .1556	p. 01
getting a job	Tau = .1880	p. 01
planning to return	Tau = .1640	p. 01
attending a community college	Chi-sq = 19.15535 with 6 df c = .32883 c_{max} = .81240	p. 01

Negative correlations were found for two factors.

GPA	Tau = −.1184	p. 01
impersonal campus	Tau = −.1043	p. 01

Students reporting acceptance to a new school as a reason for withdrawal (i.e., transferring students) showed a somewhat different profile. A high ranking of this was positively correlated with the following:

GPA	Tau = .1659	p. 01
major not offered	Tau = .1329	p. 01
attending a university (rather than a community college)	Chi-sq = 34.07483 with 8 df c = .32883 c_{max} = .81240	p. 01

Two factors exhibited negative correlations for transferring students.

A correlation of the ranking of financial reasons with the other reasons for withdrawal yielded several statistically significant findings although none could be considered strong. High rankings of financial reasons were positively correlated with the following:

planning to return	Tau = .2617	p. 01
accepting a job	Tau = .1743	p. 01
attending a community college	Chi-sq = 35.05630 with 8 df c = .42613 c_{max} = .81240	p. 01
attending a school in the state	Chi-sq = 14.73135 with 4 df c = .29204 c_{max} = .70711	p. 01

Negative correlations were found for the following:

GPA	Tau = −.1469	p. 01
impersonal campus	Tau = −.1525	p. 01

DISCUSSION

The results seem to indicate three distinct models of leaving behavior at this campus: a Discouraged Student Model, an Academic Model, and a Financial Model. While "contributing factors" was a common response, the varied nature of these factors precludes identifying "contributing factors" as a specific model; once such factors are broken down into specific categories, no single category constitutes a significant portion of the sample. It is interesting to note that none of the models identified is associated with ending the pursuit of a degree. On the contrary, most students went directly to another institution. It appears that interaction between some factors on the campus and factors within the student caused a reassessment of the value of the education at this particular campus for most students. In other words, the student's value of a higher education does not appear to have changed. For such students, the decision to leave seems to have been, at least in part, the results of a cost/benefit analysis: for these students, the cost of remaining at this campus outweighed the benefits.

The Discouraged Student Model

The first model, the **Discouraged Student Model,** clearly represents a failure on the part of the institution to provide needed support. Students who fit this model are confused about their career options and doing poorly in their academic work. Their attitudes about the campus are usually positive, but they are not experiencing success. While there are similarities between this model and the financial model, these students do not describe their problems in economic terms, but rather point to factors more accurately labeled as internal. It is in-

teresting to note that these students were continuing their education at a community college in large numbers. They apparently felt the university was not the appropriate place for them, and the community college was a viable alternative.

Appropriate institutional interventions have great potential to influence the decision to withdraw for this group of Discouraged Students. Increased support for undecided students will benefit those experiencing difficulty in choosing a major. The students in this model exhibit a lower GPA, as did those in the Financial Model. Unlike the Financial Model, however, these students also show more personal dissatisfaction with their own academic performance. They appear to be taking more responsibility for their behavior. These students represent a motivated population for programs designed to improve academic skills. Although these students do not necessarily require remediation, they would benefit from supplemental instruction.

The Academic Model

The **Academic Model** represents students who leave the institution for specific academic or career reasons. The receiving institution has an academic program that the sending school does not offer or has a stronger reputation in a particular discipline. These students tend to be the more academically gifted of those students who leave. While it is always a tragedy to loose good students, it is not always appropriate to label this as institutional failure. Students leaving because a desired major is not offered should be considered a result of the fluid nature of career choice. Students often do not decide on their career or major until well after they have been admitted to a university. These shifts are difficult, if not impossible, to predict.

A student who leaves to transfer to another institution, despite the fact that the desired major is available on this campus, presents a different issue. Here, the student is clearly weighing the value of the education at one institution against another. To lose such a student can be interpreted as institutional failure if the academic reputation of the program is valued so little. In the present study, however, students were lost to highly selective institutions across the nation—a far-less-alarming trend than if the students were leaving the campus for institutions considered to be competitive or less competitive.

The Financial Model

The **Financial Model** describes those students who leave the campus primarily for financial reasons. Most of these students plan to return home, get a job, and attend their local community college. Most plan to return to this campus to complete their education. Of the students expressing financial need as a reason for withdrawing, 27.1% identified the exact nature of their need (death in the family, loss of a job, and so on) in the "contributing factors" section of the survey. The other 78.9% offered no supporting information. Based on the comments that were offered, at least one-fourth of the students citing financial need were definitely experiencing money problems.

The other factors correlated to "financial reasons" included a low GPA, perhaps a clue to the underlying nature of the decision for the 78.9% of the Financial Model students who offered no further explanation. Poor academic performance may have colored the students' assessment of the economic value of remaining at this school. While none of the subjects left the school due to academic dismissal, 20.2% had a GPA below a 2.0. The majority of these students were on some form of academic warning or probation. For those subjects who iden-

tified financial reasons for withdrawal, the percentage below 2.0 was 23.7. This apparent agreement is shattered when the additional factor of the student's class is introduced. Over one-third of the freshmen expressing financial need (38.6%) had a GPA below 2.0. Only 11.2% of the sophomores and none of the juniors had a GPA that could result in academic dismissal. This does not necessarily mean that freshmen cited "financial reasons" as a more socially acceptable reason than poor academic performance, as suggested by DeBoer (1985). Churchill and Iwai compared low GPA persisters with low GPA stop-outs and found concern for finances to be greater for the stop-outs (1981). In most instances, financial concern is not the sole reason for withdrawing, but it does appear to be an important factor in a cost/benefit analysis. Since their academic success at the institution is in question, the students elect to continue their education at a local community college where costs are reduced. The uncertain benefit derived from remaining at the school can no longer justify the cost. Of course, this is not a "pure" financial reason for withdrawing, but there is some justification for describing the decision as economic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVISING

First, advisors must become attuned to the issues associated with transferring from one institution to another. A great deal of work is being done to assist incoming transfer students, but more research and programs are needed to address the student who is leaving an institution. The most complex issues surround the student who leaves and plans to return. What does such a student need from the sending institutions? How much contact should the sending institution maintain with the student? How can the institution best insure that the student will, in fact, return to the campus where his or her education began?

The Discouraged Student presents a clear challenge to the academic advisor. How can this type of student be identified early to insure the provision of necessary support services? Some institutions may indeed decide that such students should leave the campus. Advisors face difficult decisions when determining when it is appropriate for a student to leave.

Advisors confronting students who express financial concerns need to analyze each student's situation closely to determine the nature of the problem and provide an appropriate university response. The costlbenefit analysis approach can open avenues of discussion that may otherwise be closed to the advisor. The goal should be to distinguish between true financial need and a decrease in the value assigned to remaining at the institution.

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