

Reasons Why Students Decide to Leave a University

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ABSTRACT

This project was designed to expand our understanding about (1) who drops out, and (2) what predicts student attrition in the first two years at a university. An online survey and focus groups were designed to examine students' decision-making motives and non-cognitive factors that would inhibit their academic progress, retention, and success. Among the participants who responded to our survey, those who were "unlikely" to return to the university reported a unique set of difficulties that they have faced, when compared with those who planned to return to the university. A supportive framework of student retention and success must be established to aid and promote their academic success.

Keywords: College drop outs, Inhibiting factors of academic success, Cognitive and non-cognitive factors, Student retention

INTRODUCTION

The university where this project has been conducted is a 4-year Hispanic-Serving and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving institution in Southern California. The university currently enrolls approximately 34,000 undergraduate students, 44% of whom are from Hispanic/Latino background. Other groups are Asian (20%), White (16%), and African-American, American Indian and others (15%). We have invited freshmen and sophomores to participate in this project when they had no registered courses for the following semester two months after the registration period started. Our understanding was that the delay in the registration reflects cognitive and non-cognitive factors that would seriously and negatively impact their continuous enrollment. Reflecting on prior findings by researchers in the field, the following non-cognitive reasons were selected to be examined in this study: 1. Financial problems, 2. Poor secondary school preparation, 3. Undecided/Unsatisfactory majors, 4. Conflict with work and family commitments, 5. Increasing difficulty in academic success/progress, 6. Lack of quality time with faculty and counselors, 7. De-motivating school environment, 8. Undesirable experiences in classes, and 9. Lack of student support (Bownan et al. 2019; Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Kim, 2019; Kirp, 2019ab; Moody, 2019; Sagenmuller, 2019; Saunders-Scott, et al. 2018; Silver Wolf et al. 2017; Yool, 2019). In addition, this project also examined the impact from COVID-19.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WHO DECIDE TO LEAVE A UNIVERSITY

How Students Were Approached

A 64-item online survey was developed to (1) determine if the students plan to register for the following semester, (2) identify issues that they need to resolve, if any, before they are able to register for the courses in the following semester, (3) identify non-cognitive factors that inhibit their academic progress, if any, (4) determine what support they would seek from the university in order to enable their continued enrollment, (5) determine their overall educational plans and experiences at the university, and (6) closely examine reasons why they do not plan to return if they indicate that they will not register for courses in the following semester. The majority of questions involved the 5-point Likert Scale response options. To exemplify, a couple of questions in the survey are: “I know my major is the right one for my skills and interests,” and “My advisor and instructors care about my academic success.” Both questions had the five response options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Some open-ended questions were also included in order to ask respondents to describe the difficulties they had faced in more detail.

The project is currently ongoing. The results reported in this paper are from the survey administered in January 2021, which preceded Spring 2021. Students who completed the survey in January 2021 were also given the opportunity to participate in a focus group to discuss their enrollment situation and academic performance in more depth. Due to COVID-19, the data collection in focus groups was completed using an online whiteboard and zoom. Given a unique modality utilized in a focus group, the interviews were completed on an individual basis to provide a secure and private discussion (approximately 15 minutes/session). When students agreed to participate in focus group discussion, the following preliminary questions were sent to them to allow them to prepare their thoughts for the live discussion:

- What factors affected you in the last semester you enrolled in the university?
- Was COVID-19 a big factor in why enrollment was difficult?
- What can the university do to make enrollment easier?
- Tell us about the struggles you have had at the university.
- What can the university do to make your academic experience better?

What Was Revealed

On January 8, 2021, a link to the survey was sent to 1,391 students, and 188 students responded to the survey by the end of January. Data were analyzed after excluding 53 respondents who remained “in progress” through the survey administration period. This provided us with 134 participants whose responses were analyzed. The majority of respondents indicated that they had not registered for Spring 2021 courses because they faced difficulties in: successfully completing course work; financial security; selecting major/career goals; being connected with faculty/advisors; and seeking help & using university services.

Table 1. Non-cognitive factors.

Factors	Examples: Student Perceptions
Financial Problem	Persisting financial difficulties
Lack of quality time with faculty and counselors	Not being connected with faculty & advisors Not being in contact with faculty & counselors Intimidation (e.g., difficult or not ready to reach out to instructors or counselors)
Lack of student support	Perceived non-support (e.g., “Please reach out to me!”) Low levels of awareness, access, and use of University Support Services
Conflict with work and family commitments	Lack of understanding/support for college education from family Lack of support on family needs that conflict with academic pursuit
Student self-regulation	Some self-regulatory factors (e.g., time management, procrastination, goal setting)
Pandemic-related	Multitudes of obligations (e.g., financial, caregiving)

Table 2. Cognitive factors.

Factors	Examples: Student Perceptions
Undecided/unsatisfactory college majors	Undecided, undeclared, undesirable, & unsuitable majors
Increasing difficulty in academic success/progress	Difficulty in maintaining good academic progress Difficulty in catching up after failing
Pandemic-related	Difficulty in online modalities of instruction during COVID-19

One of the crucial goals of the survey data analyses was to reveal what differentiate “those who ultimately drop out” from “those who do not” even when the students encounter similar challenges (e.g., low GPA, financial difficulties). Sixty-six percent of the survey respondents indicated that they were either “extremely” or “somewhat” likely to return to the university, and the remaining 34% indicated either “extremely” or “somewhat” unlikely to return. Our data indicated that as compared to those who had an intention to return to the university, those who would not return to the university had more intense difficulties related to the inhibiting factors, which included Financial Problems, Lack of quality time with faculty and counselors, Lack of student support, Conflict with work and family commitments, Their own unsatisfactory levels of self-regulation, Undecided/unsatisfactory majors, Increasing difficulty in academic success/progress, and Pandemic-related difficulties.

Supportive Framework for Student Retention and Success

The findings suggest a strong need to systematically support students who struggle. The majority of struggling students are first-time college students in the family, and those who come from low-income and under-represented families and demographic groups that have been severely affected by COVID-19. When struggling, those students were not necessarily aware of campus resources or did not utilize the existing support services even when they were aware. Students sought individualized advising and wanted the university to reach out to them. In order to promote students' success, a holistic system must be built. For instance, it might be helpful if we try to: (1) unite financial aid, career advising, physical and mental health support, counseling, and academic support in order to ease and foster access by students, and (2) promote a sense of belonging and connectedness between students and faculty, advisors, counselors, peers, and student support services as soon as they start their college lives. To that end, building powerful learning communities and sound systems for faculty- and peer-mentoring support could be one useful strategy. Particularly, during the current unique time during the pandemic, it is important for us to recognize that multitudes of issues (e.g., economic challenges, racism, and COVID-19) intersect in the lives of at-risk students who are from minoritized and disadvantaged groups.

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that U.S. college student attrition has drastically increased over the years. Nearly one-third of students in the nation drop out of college before the start of their second year (Venit & Bevevino, 2020). One contributing factor is that increasingly more "new-gen" students (e.g., poor, minority, or first-gen students), as named by Kirp (2019a), have entered the colleges lately. The entry of new-gen students has introduced unique needs to universities in relation to sustainable accommodations, food security, expanded student support services, and additional campus networks. According to Stein (2018):

..., first-generation students feel unprepared for college, have a lack of funds for college and are more likely to work while attending college than other generational students and express challenges in integration with the college community. First-generation students have also been found to experience "less support from their family in attending college and spend less time socializing with their peers and talking with their teachers in high school." Both problems are linked to factors that affect college success.

Because students who cannot meet their basic needs tend to lag academically, educational strategies and practices must be realigned with the additional needs that new-gen students bring in, in a way that matches their explicit difficulties. In addition, the pandemic has added another layer of difficulties on those students' college lives. Due to COVID-19, students tend to have increased obligations from school, family and work that intertwine and conflict, and have suddenly been asked to find a way to adjust their lives

with new modes of instruction and different demands that online, hyflex, and hybrid instruction would bring. Students have felt increasingly more isolated. To support students' academic success in the current trying time, it is important that truly student-ready universities need to emerge immediately. Those student-ready universities should be able to provide their students with more integrated and holistic support. To meet the goal, the universities that aspire to become student-ready must carefully revisit their fiscal structure so they can make important decisions to quickly and sufficiently allocate necessary resources to enable effective and holistic student support. For instance, for students with financial need, it is important that they be financially supported through participation in university programs (e.g., through stipends) as opposed to off campus employment. This will allow those students to have more financial stability while benefitting from university programs that are designed to enrich their lives and improve their academic success.

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