

Factors associated with student withdrawal from community college

Donna Scoggin
Ronald A. Styron

Dr. Scoggin is a nursing instructor at Jones County Junior College in Ellisville, Mississippi.

Dr. Styron is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Research at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

Research was designed to identify commonalities of personal, enrollment, withdrawal, and evaluative factors as they relate to student withdrawal from community college. The study sought to identify interrelationships between identified reasons for student withdrawal and the variables of gender, race, classification status, degree sought, plans for re-enrollment, and age. A descriptive analysis of the variables reported frequencies and percentages for each. One thousand one hundred ninety-six surveys completed by students at the time of withdrawal from the college provide the data source for the study.

Introduction

Community colleges offer a wide range of educational programs and services for students and in several states account for the greater proportion of higher education enrollment. In order to meet the needs of a diverse student population and to assist students in completing their education, the curricular offerings at community colleges have proliferated (Bragg, 2001). Similar to larger four-year institutions, two-year colleges have an acute awareness of their need to increase their rates of program completion. Nationally, approximately one-third of all entering full-time students complete their programs of study (Tinto, 1994). The reality that two-year institutions face is a retention problem which affects individuals

on both the micro and the macro levels (Walters, 2003). Research about retention in junior/community colleges remains relatively limited, with much of the research occurring after the early 1990s. In a study on retention at selected two-year colleges, Wyman (1997) points out that research on retention lacks volume, scope, and usability. At the same time, the significance of retention increases as it is identified as an indicator of college effectiveness. At most institutions of higher learning, evaluation of institutional effectiveness is mandated for accreditation. Careful study of student retention rates continues to be a central component in the measurement and evaluation of institutional effectiveness.

The open admissions policies of community colleges make student retention challenging. The average community college freshman is considered to be academically unprepared for higher education. Therefore, community colleges work to overcome academic deficits and retain these students (Mahon, 2003).

The current study describes data collected from voluntary surveys completed by students at a community college in southern Mississippi at the time they withdrew from the college. The study describes the commonalities found among selected personal, enrollment, withdrawal, and evaluative factors as they relate to student withdrawal, and the interrelationships between them.

Review of related literature

The declining retention rate in institutions of higher learning is not a new problem but is clearly one that needs exploration to determine possible variables that influence student retention. Umoh and Eddy (1994) state that student withdrawal from college has been recognized as a major problem for colleges and universities. Astin, Korn, and Green (1987) identify student retention and satisfaction with colleges as being urgent, complex issues that administrators must face. According to El-Khawas (1986), the intense focus on student retention is most prevalent in community colleges. Summers (2003) reports high student withdrawal rates in community colleges consistently across several decades. As Umoh and Eddy (1994) further note, the withdrawal carries with it significant social, economic, as well as educational implications. Historically, the problem of student attrition has gained attention because of the negative effect it has on institutional revenues (Polansky, Horan, & Hanish, 1993).

According to Brawer (1996), studies that investigate retention and attrition of students attending community colleges gather data to identify the typology of students who are more likely to remain in school and students who are considered to be at a higher risk of dropping out. Tinto (1975) presented a model which indicated that retention is directly influenced by pre-entry attributes, commitments, and goals that the student

possesses, as well as the student's academic and social integration. Bean and Metzner (1985) formulated a model that conceptualizes persistence as dependent upon the student's background, social integration, environmental variables (such as employment and financial situation), and academic variables.

In a research study conducted by Hoyt (1999), the findings indicate that drop-out rates are higher among students who work full-time and are from lower socioeconomic levels. In an additional study conducted by Rickinson and Rutherford (1995), students who withdrew during their first term of school cited reasons for leaving the university, reasons that fall into three main categories:

1. feeling that they are not prepared academically
2. feeling that they are not prepared emotionally for the demands of school work and university life
3. welfare problems, such as family and financial responsibilities.

According to Hoyt (1999), the differences in retention rates among colleges and universities provide unique insights. However, in order to improve retention rates, educators must understand the needs of students admitted to their particular institution. Community colleges operate under an open-admission policy and admit a large number of part-time students and older working adults. The administrators and faculty at these institutions have limited control over

such factors. Therefore, as the factors are considered, institutional administrators search for interventions that target specific elements identified in student retention research studies.

Research design

Common enrollment factors include classification; enrollment status; type of degree being sought; academic, technical, or vocational division of student's major; and plans for re-enrollment. Full-time or part-time enrollment status of the student was examined. The types of degrees examined in the study include the Associate in Arts (AA), Associate in Applied Science (AAS), and Vocational Certificates. The instructional division—academic, technical, or vocational—of withdrawing students was identified. Other withdrawal factors explored came from a list of options the students were presented when withdrawing: financial reasons, academic difficulty, work, relocation, general disinterest, personal reasons, transportation difficulty, health reasons, desired program unavailable, lack of advisement, unsatisfactory faculty relationships, and unsatisfactory student relationships.

Following the descriptive analysis of commonalities related to withdrawal, the researchers determined if interrelationships exist between selected factors. The study included a determination and discussion of interrelationships between: (a) gender and identified reasons for

withdrawal, (b) race and identified reasons for withdrawal, (c) classification of the student and identified reasons for withdrawal, (d) degree sought and identified reasons for withdrawal, (e) plans for re-enrollment and identified reasons for withdrawal, and (f) age and identified reasons for withdrawal.

Participants

The participants for the study were students enrolled in a selected community college of approximately 4,500 students in south Mississippi who withdrew from the college between the fall 2002 semester and fall 2003. Students withdrawing from the college have the opportunity to complete a withdrawal survey on a volunteer basis. Therefore, the participants in the study were those students who withdrew from the college and voluntarily completed the survey during the identified time frame.

Procedures

Data for the study is archival data collected from a survey instrument entitled "Withdrawal Request Form," the survey completed on a volunteer basis at the time the

student withdrew from the college. The study used surveys from four semesters: fall 2002, spring 2003, summer 2003, and fall 2003. Selected categories from the survey included in the study were age, race, classification, gender, enrollment, degree sought, instructional division of the student's program of study, reasons for withdrawal, plans to re-enroll at the college, and the evaluative section regarding faculty, instructional classes, counseling services, and college facilities.

Analysis of data

Archival data of the 1,196 students who withdrew from the community college during the semesters identified and completed the withdrawal survey provided the research data.

The majority of students who withdrew and voluntarily completed the survey stated that they did plan to re-enroll at the college (Table 1) though the time frame for re-entry varied. The college should further explore enhancing the desire of the student to return to college, especially if situations arose that led the student to withdraw rather than simply not wanting to attend college. In addition, students could be encouraged to meet

Table 1 • Student plans for re-enrollment

Decision/time frame	Frequency	Percent
Yes, next semester	538	45.0
Yes, next year	71	5.9
Yes, but not sure when	263	22.0
No, do not plan to re-enroll	229	19.1
Missing	95	7.9

with a counselor to identify issues that might help avoid withdrawal or at least promote an expedient return to school.

Table 2 shows the primary factor in student withdrawal was personal reasons. A very low percentage of students selected academic difficulty as a reason for withdrawal. However, with personal reasons as the leading cause for withdrawal, it is possible the personal reasons could have interfered with academic performance. Since the option labeled “academic difficulty” could carry a negative connotation, the students might not want to suggest they were academically incapable of remaining in college. The researchers think that an option such as “grades not as high as could be achieved” would perhaps cause students to consider the academic performance as leading to the final decision to withdraw. There are many variables that can contribute to a student having sig-

nificant personal problems. Sometimes, the problems can seem so overwhelming to college students they feel that their only option is to withdraw. Again, by recognizing that the students have identified personal problems as the leading reasons for withdrawal, the counseling service at the college should play a key part in assisting students to manage their personal problems and avoid withdrawal from college.

Other identified leading causes for withdrawal—financial reasons and work—are closely related. Financial difficulties might demand that the student work, which could certainly interfere with the ability to attend college and/or have the time needed to study. Implications for college administrators and college personnel would include making sure students are informed of all available scholarships, grants, loans, or other funding sources. It should be noted, however, that some students have difficult finan-

Table 2 • Selected reasons for withdrawal

Reason	Frequency	Percent
Financial	251	22.2
Academic difficulty	54	4.8
Work	193	17.1
Relocation	121	10.7
General disinterest	21	1.9
Personal reasons	516	45.7
Transportation difficulties	130	11.5
Health	122	10.8
Desired program unavailable	15	1.3
Lack of advisement	6	.5
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	8	.7
Unsatisfactory student relationships	1	.1

cial situations extending far beyond educational expenses, situations that may have to be resolved before the student can afford to attend school. Sometimes situations can be managed if the student is guided through the financial aid office, identifying ways to borrow money, consolidate loans, or make other needed financial adjustments which allow the student to remain in college.

The research study findings in Tables 3–5 present the Likert scale evaluation by students of faculty, instructional classes, counseling services,

Table 3 • Rating of faculty by students upon withdrawal

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Very poor	4	.3
Poor	2	.2
Fair	52	4.3
Good	364	30.4
Excellent	613	51.3
No opinion	62	5.2
Missing	99	8.3

Table 4 • Rating of instructional classes by students upon withdrawal

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Very poor	4	0.3
Poor	2	0.2
Fair	58	4.8
Good	408	34.1
Excellent	548	45.8
No opinion	73	6.1
Missing	103	8.6

Table 5 • Rating of counseling services by students upon withdrawal

Rating	Frequency	Percent
Very poor	6	0.5
Poor	11	0.9
Fair	61	5.1
Good	380	31.8
Excellent	506	42.3
No opinion	128	10.7
Missing	104	8.7

and college facilities. The majority of students rated each of the areas as good to excellent. Therefore, with high ratings the researchers determined no further analysis for relationships to other variables was warranted. College administration should commend the faculty for providing an educational experience that the student feels positive about. The college counseling service should receive commendation for demonstrating quality service to those who sought assistance through that department.

The study also provides insight into relationships of certain variables by frequency to the identified reasons for withdrawal. The results of the first analysis (Table 6) reflect an evaluation of reasons for withdrawal by gender. As the overall results had initially indicated, personal reasons were the number one reason cited by both males and females for withdrawal. The second highest frequency of reason for withdrawal was work for the males and financial reasons for the females, closely related issues that the financial aid office could address to help resolve some of the financial barriers for students who attend college.

Another leading reason for withdrawal cited by females was health. Many times, health issues that lead to withdrawal are beyond the scope of college assistance. However, the researchers propose that a college nurse could help students by conducting health fairs, providing in-services focused on wellness promotion, and provid-

ing screenings for early detection of commonly occurring problems such as hypertension, diabetes, and gastrointestinal complaints.

When race was used to explore relationships among the reasons for withdrawal identified by frequency, the results indicate that the leading reasons are the same for African Americans and Whites (Table 7). The top two reasons reported are personal and financial issues, which further stresses the importance of addressing them from a college-wide standpoint. The findings of the study indicate that African Americans also report health issues as a leading reason for withdrawal.

Analysis of the data in Tables 8–11 identifies the reasons for withdrawal based on the classification of the students and the degrees they seek. Personal reasons remain the number one reason for all classifications presented and in all categories for degree being sought. Other factors identified by the classifications and degree options with higher frequencies are similar to the previous comparative analyses. Financial issues, work, transportation difficulty, and health are again identified as reasons for withdrawal. A leading reason for withdrawal identified by the students seeking an Associate in Applied Science degree was relocation. As America has become an increasingly mobile society, relocation as a reason for withdrawal may be expected with growing frequency. Some of the relocation issues could potentially be reduced if increased community

Table 6 • Selected reasons for withdrawal by gender

Reason	Male Frequency		Female Frequency	
	N	%	N	%
Financial	97	25.1	145	20.4
Academic difficulty	23	5.9	31	4.4
Work	98	25.3	88	12.4
Relocation	48	12.4	69	9.7
General disinterest	12	3.1	9	1.3
Personal reasons	153	39.5	349	49.0
Transportation difficulties	52	13.4	74	10.4
Health	24	6.2	97	13.6
Desired program unavailable	8	2.1	5	0.7
Lack of advisement	2	0.5	3	0.4
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	3	0.8	2	0.3
Unsatisfactory student relationships	0	0	1	0.1

Table 7 • Selected reasons for withdrawal by race

Reason	African American		White	
	N	%	N	%
Financial	109	25.2	136	20.7
Academic difficulty	16	3.7	37	5.6
Work	51	11.8	132	20.1
Relocation	43	9.9	71	10.8
General disinterest	3	0.7	17	2.6
Personal reasons	171	39.5	332	50.6
Transportation difficulties	82	18.9	45	6.9
Health	57	13.2	59	9.0
Desired program unavailable	3	0.7	11	1.7
Lack of advisement	3	0.7	3	0.5
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	2	0.5	4	0.6
Unsatisfactory student relationships	0	0	0	0

Table 8 • Selected reasons for withdrawal by freshman and sophomore students

Reason	Freshman		Sophomore	
	N	%	N	%
Financial	158	23.9	59	20.6
Academic difficulty	37	5.6	10	3.5
Work	116	17.5	48	16.8
Relocation	66	10.0	35	12.2
General disinterest	14	2.1	5	1.7
Personal reasons	296	44.8	138	48.3
Transportation difficulties	90	13.6	23	8.0
Health	74	11.2	30	10.5
Desired program unavailable	8	1.2	4	1.4
Lack of advisement	2	0.3	2	0.7
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	3	0.5	2	0.7
Unsatisfactory student relationships	1	0.2	0	

Table 9 • Selected reasons for withdrawal by 1- and 2-year vocational students

Reason	One-year vocational		Two-year vocational	
	N	%	N	%
Financial	4	25.0	3	11.1
Academic difficulty	1	6.3	0	
Work	0		5	18.5
Relocation	3	18.8	3	11.1
General disinterest	1	6.3	0	
Personal reasons	4	25.0	14	51.9
Transportation difficulties	4	25.0	3	11.1
Health	0		2	7.4
Desired program unavailable	0		0	
Lack of advisement	0		0	
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	0		1	3.7
Unsatisfactory student relationships	0		0	

Table 10 • Selected reasons for withdrawal by other 2-year students

Reason	2-year technical		Other	
	N	%	N	%
Financial	8	16.7	7	17.5
Academic difficulty	2	4.2	1	2.5
Work	8	16.7	3	7.5
Relocation	3	6.3	4	10.0
General disinterest	1	2.1	0	
Personal reasons	32	66.7	18	45.0
Transportation difficulties	4	8.3	2	5.0
Health	4	8.3	4	10.0
Desired program unavailable	0		0	
Lack of advisement	1	2.1	1	2.5
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	1	2.1	1	2.5
Unsatisfactory student relationships	0		0	

Table 11 • Selected reasons for withdrawal by degree being sought

Reason	A.A.		A.A.S.		Vocational	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Financial	96	22.0	69	25.2	32	21.8
Academic difficulty	14	3.2	14	5.1	9	6.1
Work	72	16.5	50	18.2	30	20.4
Relocation	53	12.2	28	10.2	8	5.4
General disinterest	8	1.8	4	1.5	5	3.4
Personal reasons	193	44.3	133	48.5	54	36.7
Transportation difficulties	49	11.2	26	9.5	23	15.6
Health	46	10.6	29	10.6	13	8.8
Desired program unavailable	3	0.7	4	1.5	3	2.0
Lack of advisement	2	0.5	1	0.4	2	1.4
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	4	0.9	2	0.7	1	0.7
Unsatisfactory student relationships	0		0		0	

Table 12 • Selected reasons for withdrawal and plans for re-enrollment

Reason	Yes, next semester		Yes, next year		Yes, not sure when		No	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Financial	125	23.9	14	20.0	58	22.4	44	19.7
Academic difficulty	26	5.0	4	5.7	15	5.8	8	3.6
Work	83	15.9	12	17.1	60	23.2	27	12.1
Relocation	9	1.7	2	2.9	24	9.3	80	35.9
General disinterest	5	1.0	1	1.4	8	3.1	6	2.7
Personal reasons	247	47.3	33	47.1	139	53.7	77	34.5
Transportation difficulty	82	15.7	3	4.3	24	9.3	14	6.3
Health	72	13.8	18	25.7	16	6.2	11	4.9
Desired program unavailable	4	0.8	1	1.4	3	1.2	5	2.2
Lack of advisement	2	0.4	1	0.4	1	0.4	2	0.9
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	1	0.2	0		1	0.4	4	1.8
Unsatisfactory student relationships	0		0		0		1	0.4

Table 13 • Selected reasons for withdrawal by age category (in years)

Reason	16 to 22		23 to 39		40 & over	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Financial	157	21.6	70	23.6	8	16.7
Academic difficulty	41	5.6	9	3.0	3	6.3
Work	128	17.6	44	14.9	13	27.1
Relocation	89	12.3	24	8.1	3	6.3
General disinterest	17	2.3	4	1.4	0	
Personal reasons	344	47.4	130	43.9	16	33.3
Transportation difficulty	85	11.7	35	11.8	5	10.4
Health	66	9.1	34	11.5	11	22.9
Desired program unavailable	7	1.0	3	1.0	3	6.3
Lack of advisement	4	0.6	2	0.7	0	
Unsatisfactory faculty relationships	6	0.8	1	0.3	0	
Unsatisfactory student relationships	1	0.1	0		0	

efforts provide incentives to attract the students as potential employees. If college administration works closely with business and industry and provides a liaison who places students in a business for a time of mentoring or external experiences, students might remain in the area for future employment. A liaison could also inform business contacts of the students who will be completing programs of study or who will be furthering their education in a particular field.

Table 12 reflects relationships between the frequency of reasons for withdrawal and plans for re-enrollment. Among all three time options by which students reported planning to re-enroll, the leading reason for withdrawal was personal reasons. Once again, the same leading reasons for withdrawal found in other areas of the study were identified by the students who reported that they did plan to re-enroll in college—work, financial issues, and health. Relocation was the leading reason for withdrawal by those who did not plan to return, a logical finding considering that relocation often involves distance to the college which would make travel unreasonable.

Final results of the study shown in Table 13 reveal that reasons for withdrawal had a minimal degree of variance by age. The leading reasons for withdrawal in each age category were personal reasons, followed by financial and work issues. As the students reached age 40 and above, a different reason for withdrawal—health—was identified

with the fourth highest frequency. The provisions recommended for health promotion and wellness enhancement would be especially applicable to this age group.

Recommendations for policy and practice

When considering factors associated with student withdrawal and contemplating what should be done to improve retention, administrators should not implement efforts to accomplish higher retention rates for the sole purpose of institutional benefits. More importantly, they should focus on helping students remain in college in order to reach their educational goals. Administrators need to set the benchmark for being customer friendly and make a sincere effort to determine what the students of the college want and need. Administrators and faculty should remember that while it is important to assist all students toward their educational goals, there are certain populations that require additional consideration, especially early in the educational process. Personal reasons, as a leading cause of student withdrawal, encompass numerous factors, including the student's lack of feeling college involvement or commitment to the educational endeavors. Administrators have the challenge of meeting needs for student involvement in the college environment so that students become more aware of their opportunities at the college, develop a sense of commitment for attending college, and, most importantly, do

not wish to leave. These objectives can best be accomplished through the student services division where various student activities can be planned on a monthly basis, with special populations highlighted and special events designed to meet their inclusion needs. Communication of the activities should be expanded, perhaps using student e-mail and faculty announcements in classes about upcoming events that would be of special value to the students.

Conclusions

Not only should efforts for retention involve an active process by the college, but retention activities should also involve holding the students accountable for their attendance at school. Not attending classes for personal or other reasons can seriously interfere with learning and could lead to a reduction in the desire to remain in school. Administrators who set up a process to inform students

of their absences can also address the potential result of their missing classes. At the same time, instructors have a valuable opportunity to explore with students the things occurring in their lives that could result in multiple absences which might in turn lead to withdrawal from college.

College administrators should instruct faculty on the importance of early recognition of problems that deter students from remaining in college. Students should be provided with an academic advisor who works one-on-one helping them to identify educational goals. In addition, advisors and instructors should encourage students to communicate problems early so that steps can be taken to avoid withdrawal. Finally, since the cause most cited for student withdrawal is personal reasons, additional study should be conducted to ascertain a more precise understanding of what those personal reasons may be.

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