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THE EXTENT AND NATURE OF STUDENT ATTRITION IN THE FIRST FIVE YEARS AT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: A 29% return was received of questionnaires mailed to the 4,954 undergraduates who made up the population of voluntary and administrative dropouts at Simon Fraser University during the first five years of its operation. Analysis of the responses indicated that most students left in their first year of studies, that they did not discuss their plans with university personnel, but would have liked to talk with faculty and/or administrators, that they attributed their reasons for withdrawal almost equally to academic difficulties, personal-emotional problems, and external-environmental pressures, in that order, that two-thirds of them had resumed some type of formal study, and that women were significantly less likely than men to become administrative dropouts.

Numerous studies have been conducted in the past two decades in an attempt to identify, examine, and understand some of the reasons why a student who begins a degree program decides to leave university without graduating (Miller, 1970).

The amount of attention and energy given to these attrition studies reflects the concern of institutions over the loss of time, talent, wastage of institutional time and money, and the distress to the individual students and their families. An elusive element of demoralization which may or may not be consciously understood within

the university community arises from the students' concern for each other and for themselves as they wonder whether or not they too may become "drop-out" statistics.

Statistics on withdrawals from educational institutions vary considerably, but one point on which the studies do agree is that the attrition rate is highest during the freshman year. In his extensive statistical survey of drop-outs, Summerskill (1962) concluded that only 40 percent of the students who are admitted to four year colleges or universities graduate within four years. An additional 20 percent of those freshmen graduate later, although some of them may do so at another institution. He identified three major dimensions which seem to account for such attrition — academic skills, motivation, and personal adjustment.

Summerskill's study was based in part on conditions which existed before the student unrest of the 1960's. Simon Fraser University was an "instant" university designed for an initial enrolment of not more than 1500 students. It opened in 1965 with 2,500 undergraduates, no professional schools, and a young faculty. These conditions provided an ideal setting for student demonstrations (Keniston, 1971). In 1966 the university began a stormy period which lasted into the 1970's, and shared with Sir George Williams University in Montreal the dubious distinction of having the greatest amount of overt student and faculty unrest in Canada. In addition to many minor incidents, there was an occupation of the administrative offices which led to the arrest of 114 individuals.

Students questioned the value of a university education; some faculty members went on strike; classes were disrupted and students asked for and were given the opportunity to serve on decision-making bodies at all levels. For many students the activity was both exciting and unsettling and their studies were often neglected. For the majority, however, classes continued, examinations were written, programs completed, and students graduated. Some students did become "disenchanted" with the university, changed their plans, and dropped out. This background of change accounts for items in the questionnaire, reproduced at the end of this article, about the drop-outs' attitudes toward the relevance of the university and society in general. It was also the reason for a category of responses under the heading of environmental and external influences.

At the time of this attrition study in 1970, a total of 12,107 students had been admitted to the university. This meant there was a manageable number of undergraduate student records which could be examined and these presented a unique opportunity to get in touch with a population, rather than just a sample, of students who had dropped out.

Any undergraduate student who could be placed in one of the following categories was considered a "drop-out":

1. had withdrawn voluntarily in any semester
2. had not attended university for three consecutive semesters and would be required to re-apply for admission

3. had been "required-to-withdraw" for one calendar year because of unsatisfactory academic performance, or,
4. had been placed on "permanent withdrawal" because of continued unsatisfactory academic performance.

These four categories accounted for 4,954 of the 12,107 students, an overall attrition rate of 41 percent. Of that group 32 percent were voluntary withdrawals and 9 percent were administrative withdrawals. This compares favourably with other statistical studies, which suggest a voluntary withdrawal rate of up to 50 percent of the student population (Summerskill, 1962).

METHOD

In November, 1970, the Counselling Service and the Student Affairs Office examined all student records individually and identified those students who fell into any one of the four drop-out categories. The questionnaire mailed to these students asked them why they had withdrawn from the university without completing their academic programs, what they had done since leaving, and what they were planning to do in the future. The questionnaires were anonymous but colour-coded for each of the four categories mentioned above. The only identifying data supplied by the student were age, sex, number of semesters attended, and number of course hours completed. A postage-prepaid envelope was enclosed for reply.

The questionnaire included the more common statements made by students in exit and counselling interviews. These questions reflected typical drop-out concerns and the possible effect of student unrest on students' academic plans. The questionnaire was designed for flexibility in choice of answers. The student had the option of identifying more than one reason in answer to each question without being asked to indicate order of importance.

RESULTS

Of the 4,954 questionnaires which were mailed out, 815 were returned "address unknown." It was assumed that the remaining 4,139 had reached their destinations. The 1,208 usable returns (29 percent), mirrored the population composition in each of the four drop-out categories (Table 1). Because the questionnaires were anonymous it was not possible to do a follow-up mailing.

Slightly more than half (53 percent) of these students left within the first year of their studies; 26 percent left in their second year, and the remaining 21 percent in the last two years of their programs. Each one of the semesters is represented, but the first year is the critical period (Summerskill, 1962). Immediately after leaving Simon Fraser University they had either found employment (41 percent), registered in another post-secondary institution (21 percent), travelled (14 percent) had no definable activity (13 percent), or had married (11 percent).

Table 1

Number of Questionnaires Mailed and Usable Returns by Drop-out Category*

	Total Mailed	Usable Returns	Percentage of Total Mailed	Percentage of Usable Returns
Category				
Voluntary Withdrawal in any semester................	1868	440	38%	36%
Absent for more than three semesters...............	1918	500	39%	41%
Required to Withdraw........	1009	244	21%	20%
Permanent Withdrawal......	159	24	2%	3%
Total.....................	4954	1208		

*Questionnaires were anonymous but colour coded by category.

One to four years later, at the time the questionnaire was completed, these students were either regularly employed (51 percent) continuing post-secondary education (33 percent), unemployed (10 percent) or engaged in unspecified activity (6 percent). During the period between dropping out of university and completing the questionnaire, they had completed or were continuing with various courses of study: graduate programs (1 percent), undergraduate programs (10 percent), undergraduate courses (17 percent), technical-professional training (37 percent) and a variety of short-term programs (4 percent). The remaining 31 percent had apparently abandoned formal study.

Drop-outs fell into two broad categories, "voluntary" in which the student made the decision, and "administrative" in which the university made the decision on the basis of the student's unsatisfactory academic performance. One of the most striking findings of the study comes from a comparison of men and women in relation to these two categories. Women were significantly less likely to be administrative drop-outs than were men (Table 2).

The chief purpose of the questionnaire was to identify as many reasons as possible why students left the University before their programs were completed. The reasons given grouped into three major headings — academic and study problems; personal-emotional concerns; and environmental influences which included extra-mural interests and commitments. Instead of using Summerskill's groupings, this study includes personal motivation in the "personal-emotional" category and adds the dimension of external-environmental influences (Table 3).

Many students included letters or comments with their completed questionnaires giving additional information and making suggestions which they hoped would be helpful. A sampling of these comments follows. If a name and address was given, the student was thanked

Table 2

Comparison of Voluntary and Administrative Drop-outs by Sex of Student[1]

	Male	Female	X^2
1. Voluntary Decision			
(1) Formal Withdrawal..................	269	171	
(2) Absent for more than 3 semesters....	296	204	
Total............................	565	375	.366
2. Administrative Decision			
(1) Required to Withdraw..............	203	41	
(2) Permanent Withdrawal.............	21	3	
Total...........................	224	44	.295
3. Voluntary vs Administrative Decision			
Voluntary Decisions.................	565	375	
Administrative Decisions.............	224	44	
Total............................	789	419	50.7*

[1]Overall undergraduate student population at Simon Fraser University approximately 60% male, 40% female.
*$p < .001$

Table 3

Reasons Given For Leaving Simon Fraser University

Response Category	% of Total Responses (N = 3578)	
1. Academic Reasons — N = 1327 (37%)		
(1) Had completed pre-professional courses......	60	2%
(2) Changed career goal......................	327	9%
(3) Problems with studies....................	337	9%
(4) Required to leave the university because of poor academic performance................	266	8%
(5) Disenchanted with the university generally...	337	9%
2. Personal-Emotional Problems — N = 1208 (34%)		
(1) Couldn't concentrate.....................	304	9%
(2) Upset and worried........................	213	6%
(3) Saw it all as pointless....................	265	7%
(4) Felt lonely and isolated...................	213	6%
(5) Needed time out.........................	213	6%
3. External Reasons — N = 1043 (29%)		
(1) Other commitments including marriage.......	152	4%
(2) Financial...............................	318	9%
(3) Health.................................	68	2%
(4) Found employment.......................	70	2%
(5) Wanted to travel........................	121	3%
(6) Disenchanted with society generally........	314	9%

by letter or by telephone and questions answered. Some students had died and the University had had no formal notice of their deaths. In such instances personal letters were written to the parents or family.

Student comments by drop-out category:

Formal Withdrawal

"indecision re major"
"found the atmosphere very impersonal"
"combination of emotional and financial problems"
"valued my experience at S.F.U."
"difficult institution to identify with"
"had no goal and was only putting in time"
"I attended university mainly because I was expected to but realized it wasn't for me"
"I felt that taking time out was the best thing I could have done"
"I was afraid to express myself in tutorials or on essays"

Absent for More Than Three Semesters

"I found S.F.U. a cold, desolate & lonely institution"
"found S.F.U. to be an excellent university; although my GPA was over 3.0 I just couldn't cope with exam pressure"
"I didn't know why I was at university"
"financial and family pressures"
"I felt uncomfortable as if I didn't belong"
"S.F.U. offered me more than I hoped for"
"I wasn't sure what I really wanted"
"tension and loneliness were too great"

Required to Withdraw

"I was sick before exams and failed 3 exams"
"academically, mentally and emotionally unprepared for university"
"didn't know what I wanted and was at university because my friends were"
"I needed something more practical and closer to my interests"
"I failed because I was lonely and sort of scared"
"left university because I felt the need to travel"
"I feel I should have worked before attending university"
"by reaching for the top and not making it and not being interested in the courses, I have been able to evaluate my abilities better"
"I was older than the other students and felt isolated and tense"

Permanent Withdrawal

"if on academic probation, a student should receive some kind of counselling"
"I tried to remain at S.F.U. but was asked to leave"

A student in the process of deciding to leave university with an unfinished program was more likely to discuss that decision with parents, fellow students, or friends than with someone in a position of authority on campus. However 18 percent of the students did not discuss their plans with anyone (Table 4). These students may in fact have talked with faculty or administration, but they did not perceive themselves as having done so and it is the student's perception of the situation which is crucial.

Although more than two thirds of the respondents said that no one could have altered their decision to leave, they would have liked to talk over their plans with someone at the university. The people they would have liked to talk with were faculty (27 percent), counsellors (28 percent), administration (27 percent) and financial aid (13 percent). Similar findings emerged from exit interviews conducted in the Office of Student Affairs — students did not change their minds about withdrawing at the time of the interview, but discussion and referrals had a very real impact on their future planning (Wilson, 1972).

Table 4

Sources of Advice Sought by Students Before Dropping Out

Source of Advice	Number of Responses	% of Total N = 1957
"Before I left the university I discussed my plans with":		
1. parents	468	24%
2. friend(s)	464	23%
3. no one	360	18%
4. other students	257	13%
5. faculty member	142	7%
6. spouse	125	6%
7. counsellor	118	6%
8. other	23	1%

DISCUSSION

The responses in this study came from a population of students who left Simon Fraser University, either voluntarily or because of unsatisfactory academic performance, without completing an undergraduate degree program. The completed questionnaires mirrored very closely the number of individuals in each of four drop-out categories.

This study, too, identifies the first two semesters (first year) as being the critical period in which students leave without completing their academic programs. The reasons given for this action fall almost equally into three major groupings: academic, personal-emotional, and external-environmental. Regardless of the reason for

leaving, discussion at that time, or earlier, might not have changed the immediate decision to leave but could have clarified many points on which students were poorly informed.

Lack of money is often cited as a prime reason for dropping out. The students in in-depth interviews say that "financial" is a socially acceptable reason and is frequently used as such, as an explanation for dropping out; financial reasons were not any more prominent than five or six other stated reasons.

Although the women in this study dropped out in the same proportion as their numbers in the total undergraduate population, they were significantly different from the men in being primarily "voluntary" rather than "administrative" drop-outs. One hypothesis is that women have made a more deliberate choice than men in entering a degree program and are prepared to study and determined to complete what they have begun. A second hypothesis is that the woman student takes a more realistic approach when faced with academic inadequacy; she recognizes it and leaves voluntarily.

The third hypothesis has a bearing on the two preceding ones. The cultural expectation that a man will normally go to university and succeed and that only the exceptional woman will, may still be very active. In this case the unequal social pressures would allow a woman to withdraw voluntarily with a minimum of social disapproval but would prevent a man from taking a similar course of action.

All of the students who dropped out had been acceptable by University standards. After dropping out, two thirds had continued with formal study or training, but the remaining third had not. This latter group might have been helped to direct their abilities into activities which were more satisfying to them.

A comment was made in the introduction about the demoralizing effect on students of their self-perception as "failures" and "quitters." This effect probably extends to their families who may wonder how they have failed their children. It may also extend to faculty who are aware of students dropping out of courses but who have little opportunity to find out how common this is or what might be done about it.

Student unrest was given as a reason for leaving in enough instances to make it worth investigating. The overt expression was confrontation; the covert feeling of lack of information and direction and a sense of isolation may well remain although demonstrations are no longer popular.

Positive action could be taken to identify potential drop-outs and make help available to them. Realistic planning in terms of their abilities and interests would make it easier for those who do not belong at a university to find satisfying activity elsewhere. Those who do belong in an academic program could also be helped. A system of exit interviews for students who are withdrawing, and counselling for students in academic or other difficulty, would not only help the students but would also keep the university up-to-date in terms of the students' needs and expectations.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY COUNSELLING SERVICE

Age................................ Age................ Sex M........ F........
   when I left SFU   present

I left after or during the .... semester, having completed............ semesters and

accumulated .... credit hours.

Please mark each response with a check
mark. You may want to give more than
one response to most of the questions.

1. After leaving S.F.U., I
— found a job .... (15)
— travelled .... (16)
— got married .... (17)
— did nothing .... (18)
— other .... (19)
— transferred to a post
   secondary institution
   (please specify) .... (20)

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2. Before I left the University I discussed my plans with:
— faculty member .... (21)
— spouse .... (22)
— other students .... (23)
— friend (s) .... (24)
— counsellor .... (25)
— parents .... (26)
— no one .... (27)
— other .... (28)

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3. I left S.F.U. because I
— was in poor health .... (29)
— couldn't concentrate .... (30)
— wanted to travel .... (31)
— was upset and worried .... (32)

— needed money .... (33)
— felt lonely and isolated .... (34)
— needed time out .... (35)
— was offered a job .... (36)
— had completed pre-
professional training .... (37)
— was confused about
vocational plans .... (38)
— saw it all as pointless .... (39)
— had family difficulties,
illness, etc. .... (40)
— wasn't making it aca-
demically .... (41)
— no one seemed to care
what I was doing .... (42)
— felt I was better suited
to non-university
training .... (43)
— had marriage plans .... (44)
— other .... (45)
— I was disenchanted
with S.F.U. because
of —

a) irrelevance to society's
need .... (46)
b) irrelevance to own
objectives .... (47)
c) campus unrest .... (48)
d) lack of social ameni-
ties on campus .... (49)
e) concern about the
quality of S.F.U.
degrees .... (50)
f) problems with transfer
of credits .... (51)

4. **Could anyone at S.F.U.
have done anything to
affect your decision to
leave?**

No .... (52)
Yes .... (53)
If yes, please specify .... (54)

....

....

....

....

If yes, the people who
could have helped were:

— Faculty .... (55)
— Administration .... (56)
— Counselling .... (57)
— Registrar .... (58)
— Financial Aid .... (59)
— Other .... (60)

**5. Since leaving S.F.U.,
I have completed:**
- an undergraduate
degree .... (61)
- a graduate degree .... (62)
- professional training .... (63)
- technical training .... (64)
- no further training .... (65)
- other (please specify) .... (66)

....

....

....

....

....

6. At present, I'm
- employed .... (67)
- unemployed .... (68)
- homemaker .... (69)
- a student .... (70)

at ....
- an undergraduate
student .... (71)
at ....
- a graduate student .... (72)
at ....

7. My future plans are
- to return to S.F.U. .... (73)
- to take technical
training .... (74)
- to attend another
University or college .... (75)
- to continue with my
job .... (76)
- to take other training
(eg. secretarial, trades,
etc.) .... (77)
- uncertain .... (78)
- travel .... (79)
- other .... (80)

....

....

**8. If you had it all to do over
again, would you leave
University as you did?**
no .... (81)
yes .... (82)

RESUME: De tous les questionnaires envoyés aux 4,954 étudiants de niveau collégial constituant l'ensemble des "dropouts" volontaires et administratifs à l'Université Simon Fraser pendant les cinq premières années, 29% ont été retournés. On voit d'après les réponses obtenues que la plupart des étudiants ont abandonné leurs études durant la première année, qu'ils n'ont pas parlé de leurs projets à des professeurs ou à des administrateurs, mais qu'ils auraient bien aimé pouvoir le faire; que leurs raisons pour abandonner leur études sont dues, presque à part égale, et dans cet ordre, à des difficultés académiques, des problèmes personnels et émotifs et à des pressions extérieures; que les deux tiers d'entre eux avaient repris des études spécialisées á un niveau quelconque et qu'il est rare que les femmes, comparées aux hommes, deviennent des "dropouts" administratifs.

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