

STUDENT REASONS FOR WITHDRAWING FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA: 1978-79

PAUL C. SARTORIS and ALLEN R. VANDERWELL
Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta

Abstract

A questionnaire relating to reasons for withdrawing from the University was administered to 627 University of Alberta students during the 1978-79 winter session. Almost half the students withdrawing were in the first year of their program, with the percentage of men and women withdrawing closely paralleling their representation in the intramural population. Faculty withdrawal rates were generally lower than was the case in an earlier attrition study undertaken in 1971, these decreases possibly reflecting recent quota restrictions. In decreasing order of frequency, the reasons for withdrawing labelled by students as "relevant" were as follows: to take employment or transfer to a different educational or training program, personal reasons (such as boredom, family problems, etc.), need for a break from studies, academic problems (wrong faculty, coursework irrelevant), failing courses or not measuring up, and financial difficulties. Six other reasons were included on the questionnaire but were considered relevant by relatively few respondents. Some of the implications for universities interested in lowering their attrition rate are discussed and the need to regularly monitor attrition is recommended as a readily available index of an institution's "health."

Résumé

Durant le trimestre d'hiver 1978-79, 627 étudiants de l'Université d'Alberta ont été soumis à un questionnaire concernant les causes des désistements universitaires. Environ la moitié des étudiants qui se désistèrent étaient en première année d'études. Le pourcentage d'hommes et de femmes qui se désistèrent est sensiblement parallèle à leur représentation au niveau de la population étudiante. Le taux des désistements des facultés s'est avéré généralement inférieur à celui d'un sondage d'attrition précédent effectué en 1971; il est possible que ce déclin reflète de récentes restrictions des quotas. Dans un ordre de fréquence décroissant, les raisons de désistement que les étudiants ont invoquées comme "pertinentes" étaient les suivantes: chercher un emploi ou s'orienter vers un programme d'éducation ou de formation différent, raisons personnelles (telles que ennui, problèmes familiaux), nécessité d'une interruption des études, problèmes académiques (mauvais choix de faculté, cours inappropriés), échecs académiques ou *incompétence* à suivre les cours, difficultés financières. Six autres raisons étaient incluses dans le questionnaire mais n'ont été considérées pertinentes que par un nombre relativement faible de participants. Quelques unes des implications concernant les universités désirant diminuer leur taux d'attrition sont discutées; on y recommande aussi un contrôle régulier de l'attrition en vue de fournir un index à jour nécessaire à la bonne marche d'une institution.

During the 1970-71 winter session, students' reasons for leaving the University of Alberta were studied by questionnaire as well as interview (Vanderwell & Sartoris, 1973). Since 1973, universities across North America have experienced static enrollments and prospective students have entered university studies with more uncertain employment prospects upon graduation than was generally the case in the 1960's. In view of changes in the economic and educational climate, we felt it would be timely to again examine the reasons reported by students as relevant to their decision to leave university.

Method and Results

Students withdrawing from the University of Alberta must submit a Withdrawal Form which requires signatures from several departments, including Student Counselling Services. Students typically discuss their decision with a counsellor at Student Counselling Services in the process of completing these forms. Many students, however, choose to complete withdrawal procedures by mail so that interviews are held only with those individuals who initiate withdrawal procedures in person. As indicated in Table 1, a total of 1,975 students withdrew from the University of Alberta during

Table 1
Summary of Enrollment and Withdrawal Figures
1978-79 Winter Session

	Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage	Total
Total Intramural Enrollment (Full & Part-time/Percentage of Total Enrollment by Sex	11,699	53.2	10,307	46.8	22,006
Number of Withdrawals/Percentage of Male Female Registrants who Withdraw	1,044	8.9	931	9.0	1,975
Percentage of Total Withdrawals by Sex		52.9		47.1	
Number of Withdrawing Students who Completed Questionnaire	359		259		618*

* 627 Students completed questionnaire but data regarding gender was missing on 9 cases.

the period September 1, 1978 through April 30, 1979. Of these, 627 who completed withdrawal procedures in person were interviewed and filled out a questionnaire at Student Counselling Services, the questionnaire being completed prior to their exit interview. This represents approximately 32% of the total population who withdrew. Table 1 also indicates that 8.9% of the male and 9.0% of the female intramural student body withdrew. These withdrawal rates closely parallel the proportion of men and women included in total enrollment figures.

The questionnaire was constructed by the investigators to elicit an account of student responses to categories of reasons for leaving University. The questionnaire presented 11 major categories for withdrawing, each encompassing several specifically related reasons. For example, the category "academic problems" was stated to include "enrolled in the wrong faculty, program is not what had been anticipated, course work is not very relevant." Similarly, the item "personal considerations" was stated to include "boredom, restlessness, family problems, loneliness, no friends, unmotivated, afraid of competition or failure, distressed, anxious, depressed, lack of self-control." Respondents were asked to label each major category as "not at all relevant," "slightly relevant," "somewhat relevant," "quite relevant," or "most relevant" to their decision to leave. The 11 major categories are listed in Table 5 without the full accompanying explanations or examples. Respondents were also invited to describe reasons not covered by the 11 categories. Students had the option of whether or not to identify themselves on the questionnaire but were asked to give information regarding undergraduate-graduate status, year of program, age, and gender.

Table 2 presents information on the number of withdrawals who completed the questionnaire for each month of the winter session, with September,

October, and January showing the highest withdrawal figures. Table 3 indicates that close to half of the students withdrawing are from first year, with withdrawal rates decreasing with each further year of study, a finding that is in general agreement with the literature on college attrition (Pantages & Creedon, 1978).

The number of withdrawing students completing questionnaires in each faculty as well as the withdrawal rates as related to faculty enrollment are shown in Table 4. Similar figures from 1970-1971 are presented for comparison purposes. It should be mentioned that the faculties

Table 2
Month During which Withdrawal Questionnaire was Completed

Month	1978-79
September (Sept. 11-30)	100
October	167
November	81
December	57
January	116
February	69
March	28
April (April 1-6)	7
Total Withdrawals	627

Table 3
Withdrawals by Year of Program

	Totals	Percentage
First Year	284	45.3
Second Year	161	25.7
Third Year	110	17.5
Fourth Year	48	7.7
Not Specified	24	3.8
	627	

Table 4
Withdrawals by Faculty

Faculty	1978-1979			1970-1971		
	No. of Withdrawals	Total Faculty Enrollment	Withdrawal as Percentage of Faculty Enrollment	No. of Withdrawals	Total Faculty Enrollment	Withdrawal as Percentage of Faculty Enrollment
Agriculture	24	725	3.3	19	422	4.5
Arts	121	3571	3.4	172	3091	5.6
Commerce	13	1565	.8	41	1118	3.7
Dental Hygiene	1	76	1.3	2	50	4.0
Medicine	3	791	.4	5	589	.8
Nursing	12	415	2.9	8	240	3.3
Pharmacy	7	392	1.8	5	303	1.7
Physical Education	22	660	3.3	26	598	4.3
Rehabilitation Medicine	5	346	1.5	4	215	1.9
Science	170	3114	5.5	139	2830	4.9
Dentistry	4	195	2.1	1	197	.5
Education	92	4376	2.1	105	4236	2.5
Engineering	75	1713	4.4	67	1380	4.9
Graduate Studies	6	2729	.2	—	—	—
Home Economics	15	387	3.9	9	324	2.8
Law	2	493	.4	8	366	2.2
Medical Labora- tory Science	1	98	1.0	1	88	1.1

of Agriculture, Commerce, Physical Education, and Engineering have imposed quotas since 1971 and this fact very likely has had an effect in lowering their withdrawal rates. Commerce is now in the low attrition group with such professional or career oriented faculties as Medicine, Law, and Graduate Studies, and this may reflect the increasingly stringent admission criteria due to quota limitations. With the exception of Pharmacy, Science, Dentistry, and Home Economics, all faculties show a drop in their withdrawal rates relative to enrollment, the decrease being quite large in the case of Arts, Commerce, Agriculture, and Dental Hygiene.

Reasons for Withdrawal

Table 5 summarizes the percentage of the 627 respondents labelling a withdrawal reason either as "most relevant" or "quite relevant." It should be kept in mind that each respondent rated the relevance of each of the 11 categories so that a student could conceivably indicate high relevance to a large number of the categories. The withdrawal reasons are listed in Table 5 from that most often labelled "relevant" to that least often labelled "relevant". Table 6 presents a similar summary showing the degree of "irrelevance" respondents ascribed to the 11 reasons for withdrawal.

Clearly, reasons for withdrawal are complex and such a decision may rest on several factors for

any one student. Roughly 25% of the sample rated the category "found a good job or wishing to transfer to a different educational or training program" as a relevant factor in their decision to leave university. "Personal reasons," a category which, as indicated previously, encompassed a wide range of personal considerations, was also labelled as relevant by approximately 24% of the respondents. Approximately 20% of the respondents checked "just want to get away from school, homework, books, etc. for a while" as relevant to their withdrawal decisions. "Academic problems" delineated on the questionnaire to mean "enrolled in the wrong faculty, program is not what had been anticipated, course work is not relevant," was also checked as relevant by 20% of the students completing the questionnaire. The item referring to "failing courses" was specified by the questionnaire to include "course work is more difficult than anticipated, not likely to meet required standards, lack study habits" and was cited as relevant by about 17% of the respondents. "Financial considerations," was elaborated on the questionnaire to include "family unable or unwilling to help, unable to get financial assistance, couldn't get a summer job, need to have a part-time job to make ends meet, don't want to go into debt, unexpected emergency expenses." This category was checked as relevant by approximately 16% of the respondents.

Table 5
Reasons for Withdrawal Labelled "Most Relevant" or "Quite Relevant" by Respondents

<i>Reason</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>
Found a Good Job or Wish to Transfer to Some Other Type of Educ./Training Program	155	24.7
Personal Reasons	152	24.3
Need a Break from School	128	20.4
Academic Problems	125	20.0
Failing/Not Measuring Up	109	17.4
Financial Considerations	97	15.5
University Atmosphere Unfavourable	59	9.4
Personal Health Problems	58	9.3
Unsatisfactory Living Arrangements	47	7.5
Few or No Jobs in My Study Area	46	7.3
Extracurricular Difficulties	34	5.4

Table 6
Reasons for Withdrawal Labelled "Not at all Relevant" or as "Slightly Relevant" by Respondents

<i>Reason</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>
Personal Health Reasons	550	87.7
Few or No Jobs in My Study Area	547	87.2
Extracurricular Difficulties	538	85.8
Unsatisfactory Living Arrangements	533	85.0
University Atmosphere Unfavourable	505	80.5
Financial Considerations	470	74.9
Failing/Not Measuring Up	440	70.2
Need a Break from School	432	68.9
Found a Good Job or Wish to Transfer to Some Other Type of Educ./Training Program	414	66.1
Academic Problems	394	62.8
Personal Reasons	383	61.1

The remaining categories or reasons for withdrawal were indicated as "most relevant" or "quite relevant" by less than 10% of the sample completing the questionnaire. The item relating to "university atmosphere" read as follows: "withdrawing because of the impersonal atmosphere of the university, large classes, ineffectiveness of instructors, lack of humanity or understanding, administrative problem (e.g., refusal of permission to drop a course), sexual discrimination." This item was labelled as a relevant factor by 9.4% of the questionnaire respondents. Other less frequently cited factors were (a) personal health problems (illness or accident), family illness or death, physical disability; (b) unsatisfactory living arrangements such as "living at home unsatisfactory can't function in residence, commuting time too demanding, can't stand roommate, marital problems;" (c) "few or no jobs related to my study area, would prefer to move into something with more security, can get a job now that will pay as much as I'd get with a degree;" (d) "difficulty with extracurricular life, too involved in social activity, no time for other interests, hobbies, etc., can't get into the activities wanted." As might be

expected, the above five categories are seen to head the list of those reasons checked by students as least relevant to the decision to withdraw, as shown in Table 6.

Discussion

In considering the results it should be kept in mind that the subjects of the present study were "voluntary drop-outs" who had chosen to leave the University during the academic session. Those students deciding not to return to the University during the summer break and having completed a session or more were not included in the present investigation. Similarly, this report does not concern itself with those students who were required to withdraw from the University by the administration because of unsatisfactory performance. Finally, as the present study is of a cross-sectional nature, it provides no information on what happens educationally to students who withdraw. Leaving university at some point does not necessarily mean that the student has made a permanent withdrawal from university. In fact, several studies have found that close to two-thirds or more of college and university drop-outs will re-enroll at

either the same institution at a later date or at another university (Eckland, 1964; Jex & Merrill, 1962; Johansson & Rossmann, 1973).

The data of the present study were obtained from 31.7% of the total winter session withdrawal population who followed the prescribed regulations governing official withdrawal from the University. This raises a question regarding possible differences between students who withdraw as prescribed and those who initiate procedures by mail or simply stop attending and fail to file a Withdrawal Form. It is possible the two groups would differ on demographic and attitudinal variables as well as in the reasons motivating withdrawal from university. Otto and Brunt (1972) analyzed certain information obtainable from the Registrar on withdrawing students at the University of Alberta and found several variables significantly differentiated those who follow prescribed withdrawal procedures from those who do not. Specifically, the group of students who fail to follow regulations in withdrawing was characterized by a significantly greater proportion of landed immigrants or visa students, a greater number of part-time winter day students than full-time, a larger number of married students than single ones, and a higher registration within the Faculty of Graduate Studies. While a similar analysis was not part of the present inquiry, Otto and Brunt's findings underline the need to use caution in generalizing from the sample of the present study to the total withdrawal population.

In considering student reports of their reasons for withdrawal, the reason most often given was "found a good job or wish to transfer to some other type of educational or training program." Personal reasons were cited almost as often by the questionnaire respondents. That employment or alternative education is cited with such high frequency likely reflects the fact that a sizeable number of students either enter university with an indefinite commitment to career-educational goals, or that they have formulated initial career plans lacking adequate vocational guidance and information on personally appropriate educational alternatives. The prominence of this category in accounting for the decision to leave suggests an almost "trial and error" attitude on the part of some students in making their initial decision to enroll in a university program of studies. While effective career education programs in secondary and post-secondary institutions and a sensitive liaison between high schools and universities holds the possibility of reducing attrition due to trial and error decision making to some degree, it would be utopian to expect to eliminate the uncommitted enrollee. As we have seen, withdrawal from university is greatest in the first and second year of studies. The typical student enters university at 17

or 18 years of age and, therefore, falls in what has been labelled a transitional vocational life stage by developmental theorists (Ginzberg, 1972; Ginzberg, Ginzberg, Azelrod, & Herma, 1951; Super, Crites, Hummel, Moser, Overstreet, & Warnath, 1957). Common to career developmental theorists is a stress upon individual differences in attaining "vocational maturity" and the notion that a process underlies occupational choice, rather than a one-time decision. The transitional stage into which most freshman students would fall is one in which reality factors are assuming greater importance in the consideration of occupational choice, but fantasy is still involved and choices retain a tentative quality. The transitional stage, in short, is simply not characterized by commitment and the goal persistence that accompanies it.

Personal reasons were given most often as underlying the decision to withdraw by University of Alberta students in 1970-1971 (Vanderwell & Sartoris, 1973). The results of the present questionnaire also rank personal considerations at or near the top of the list as relevant to the decision to leave university. Interestingly, almost three times as many respondents indicated personal reasons to be relevant than the item "University atmosphere unfavourable." Disillusionment with university actually ranked seventh of the reasons for withdrawal labelled "most relevant" or "quite relevant" by respondents. Whatever the impact of the University of Alberta on its students, negative reactions to it seem to be a lesser factor in the decision to drop out.

There has been a good deal of media exposure in the past few years focused on the economy's impact on employment prospects for university graduates, most of it of a disquieting nature. Possibly as a result of this, prospective students seeking career-vocational counselling at the University's Student Counselling Services have expressed more concern with employment prospects and job security in formulating educational decisions than was the case in the late sixties and early seventies. Accordingly, one might have expected concern over uncertain job prospects to have assumed considerable importance in the decision to withdraw. However, only 7.3% of the respondents labelled "few or no jobs in my study area" as relevant to their withdrawal. This finding might suggest that security considerations represent a lesser motivation to students choosing to attend university; it may also reflect the fact that contemporary students are making vocational and career choices prior to entering university with a somewhat clearer and more realistic idea of the current economic and employment picture. At the same time, we feel caution is in order in drawing any conclusion regarding the relationship of job prospects/security to attrition.

The reason labelled relevant by the highest number of respondents was "found another job or wish to transfer to some other type of educational/training program." Unfortunately, there is no way of determining from the questionnaire data the individual motivations that have prompted students to take employment or to switch to other educational institutions, but insecurity over their career prospects upon university graduation could certainly be one contributing factor.

Universities, their Student Service components, and particularly those departments focused on guidance and counselling, may take some direction from findings such as those of the present report. It is possible that there is only a limited need for counselling assistance or intervention with regard to students leaving university primarily in order to take employment or seek alternative training. One may always anticipate in our education and status conscious society that a number of students will enter university poorly equipped to cope, or lacking a sincere interest in scholarly activities. For many of these, the decision to leave to pursue other goals may be a realistic one and should occasion no great concern. The situation is quite different as regards the "personal reasons" category motivating withdrawal. Students withdrawing for personal reasons are generally distressed to the point that their intellectual functioning is adversely affected, and often are not in a frame of mind conducive to decision making. A student with such problems who has not yet decided to withdraw can often be assisted through individual counselling or through participation in structured counselling groups focused on specific problems. At the very minimum, an individual may need assistance in reaching the decision to withdraw so as to have a minimum sense of guilt or failure, and some, if even tentative, hope or plan for the future.

The relevance of "academic problems" (i.e., "wrong faculty, program is not what had been anticipated, course work is not very relevant") to university attrition underlines the need for the university to continue to strive to communicate accurate information to prospective students and the general public regarding the content, academic demands, and purpose of its programs, as well as to provide a comprehensive counselling service for applicants and enrolled students. Also, a lower withdrawal rate due to "academic problems" very much rests on carefully coordinated efforts between universities and the secondary school system, for much of the groundwork underlying effective career and educational planning must be done in the junior and senior high school years.

The fact that over 17% of the respondents indicated the item "failing courses, course work is more difficult than anticipated, not likely to meet required standards, lack adequate study habits" as

a relevant factor suggests a number of corrective measures. This item again points to the need to inform potential students of the many alternatives that are open to them, the nature and content of specific programs, and the competitive excellence required to succeed. In addition, however, this item raises the question of the adequacy of admission standards and criteria as, clearly, the selection procedures employed will affect the degree to which failure considerations become an important factor in attrition. Several investigators have, in fact, concluded that attrition may be substantially reduced by imposing more selective admissions standards (Iffert, 1957; Slocum, 1956). As regards inadequate study habits, much can be accomplished through study remediation courses offered by a counselling department or learning resources centre, assuming that students lack study strategies but bring with them the necessary language and factual background skills. Students lacking necessary academic background pose rather different corrective challenges and, again, suggest the need to re-examine admission policies/standards, and to coordinate the course curriculum of secondary and post-secondary institutions.

Financial considerations were cited as relevant by a sizeable proportion of respondents, although the 15.5% who relate financial concerns as important to their decision to leave appears to be an improvement over the 26% who did so in the earlier 1970-1971 study (Vanderwell & Sartoris, 1973). With the steady increase in tuition fees and the often difficult summer employment picture of recent years, the policies and administrative practices of government financial assistance programs will need to be sensitively monitored and adapted so as to ensure an adequate and realistic level of support for qualifying students.

The reasons for withdrawal given by students leaving the University of Alberta in 1978-1979 have been given rather different weighting than by students participating in previous studies of attrition elsewhere. Pantages and Creedon (1978) reviewed studies of college attrition over the period 1959-1975. In summarizing the findings of the large body of literature on attrition based on the reasons students themselves give, they indicate that academic matters and financial difficulties are cited most often and to almost an equal degree as basic to the decision to withdraw. Following in decreasing order of frequency are the categories of motivational problems, personal considerations, marriage considerations, student or family illness, dissatisfaction with the college environment, military service, and dropping out to get a full-time job. In commenting on this literature, Pantages and Creedon underline the danger of attempting to generalize from the results of such studies conducted in individual institutions. They stress that

different institutions will promote different reasons for dropping out due to the interplay between individual student characteristics and the college environment.

When higher attrition rates are evidenced for women than for men, concern is often expressed that women may be experiencing differential encouragement, if not being actively or subtly discouraged from pursuing chosen vocational goals. Certainly, a much higher female attrition rate gives rise to numerous questions centered around the issue of sex-fair educational practices. While one cannot draw any firm conclusions as to the University of Alberta's differential impact on male and female students from the present questionnaire data, it is encouraging to note the equivalence in withdrawal rates for the two sexes as shown in Table 1. Also, in this regard, sexual discrimination was one of several quite different illustrative examples specified under the category "University Atmosphere Unfavourable." If sexual discrimination was an issue in the minds of many people deciding to withdraw, one might have expected this category to have been more strongly represented as "relevant."

Finally, as previously mentioned, the difference in withdrawal rates between the 1970-1971 and the 1978-1979 sessions was somewhat unexpected, especially the decrease in attrition for Arts students where quotas cannot be invoked as a causative factor. In view of the security consciousness prospective students currently voice in making career decisions, and when one considers the indefinite job prospects that Arts students know they will face, it might have been more reasonable to anticipate an increase in attrition within this faculty. However, Arts programs appear to be the entry point for the increasingly significant number of older, mature students who are entering university in recent years. Many of these students enter Arts programs with self-improvement motivations superceding career considerations, and desiring the flexibility and the opportunity to pursue individual interests that typifies liberal Arts programs. It should also be mentioned that the reduced withdrawal rate in Agriculture, Commerce, and Engineering likely, in part, reflects the continuing positive employment prospects for these graduates in the Alberta economy.

Just as enrollment figures in post-secondary institutions fluctuate over a period of years, in re-

sponse to changing socioeconomic trends, student reasons motivating withdrawal from university may also vary considerably over a period of years in response to change in the character of the institution itself, to sociocultural trends, and to general conditions. Monitoring attrition and attempting to ascertain reasons for it may, like taking an individual's pulse and temperature, prove to be one of the more accessible ways to evaluate the overall general health of the institution and, in our judgment, is imperative in planning remedial actions. With universities in recent years facing static and often declining enrollments, institutional efforts made to investigate the question of why large numbers of students choose to leave university before completing their programs of study, may be more an act of survival than an intellectual exercise.

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