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STUDY OF WITHDRAWING STUDENTS FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA 1970-71 SESSION*

ABSTRACT: A withdrawal questionnaire was completed by 614 students withdrawing from the University of Alberta during the 1970-71 winter session. In addition to obtaining biographical information, reasons for withdrawal were grouped into six basic categories: financial, academic, personal, extracurricular, health, and living arrangements. Findings indicated the sex ratio for withdrawals was very similar to the enrolment sex ratio. Attrition rates from professional programs were lower than from programs where students tend to be less professionally committed. The bulk of withdrawals were first-year students with the rate of withdrawal generally being greatest early in the university session. The personal-reason category was most often given, followed closely by the academic, with the remaining being of much less relevance. These findings are discussed in relation to the structure of university programs, family and social pressures, and student needs.

The procedure for withdrawal from the University of Alberta requires all students to have an exit interview with Student Counselling Services. During the 1970-71 winter session a questionnaire was given prior to each interview. The questionnaire was constructed to elicit reasons for withdrawal from university. The content of the questionnaire included information regarding faculty placement, year of program, age at time of withdrawal, and the various reasons for withdrawal. The primary reasons for withdrawal included in the questionnaire were: financial reasons, academic reasons, personal reasons, extracurricular reasons, health reasons, and unsatisfactory living arrangements. The student was asked to weigh the relevancy of each of these reasons on a six-point scale ranging from one as "totally relevant" to six as "completely irrelevant." In addition, within each of the broad categories, the student was able to check off one or more of a number of specific complaints. The student was able to check as many of the specific complaint items as were perceived as appropriate to his experience. The specific items were not scaled for intensity so that only frequency data are available. An "other" category was included under each of the six primary reasons for

*Appreciation is expressed to the Department of Institutional Research for their assistance with this project.

withdrawal allowing the student to write in complaints not included in the listings. However, a very large number of responses given to the "other" category were simply rewordings of the specific complaint items already checked so that no analysis of these is included.

The tabulation of results was kept on a month-by-month basis but totals will be reported only for the total year. A total of 614 students completed the withdrawal questionnaire over the academic session out of a total of 1,016 students who withdrew from the university during the year. This represents approximately 60 percent of the withdrawal population (See Table 1). Table 2 presents the total number of withdrawals who completed the questionnaire for each month of the university term and also gives the proportion of males and of females withdrawing. The number of withdrawing students completing the questionnaire represents 3.3 percent of the total full-time enrollment for the session. The registrar's figures for the total number of withdrawals represents 5.5 percent of the total enrollment. (See Table 1).

The ratio of males to females withdrawing from university was very close to the ratio of sexes in the enrollment figures. This would suggest that the mortality by sex is not particularly unusual. A close

TABLE 1
Summary of Enrollment and Withdrawal Figures

	Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage	Total
Full-time enrolled	11,356	62	6,981	38	18,337
Registrar's Figures for Total Withdrawals	—	—	—	—	1,016
Withdrawals Completing Questionnaire	390	64	224	36	614

TABLE 2
Withdrawal Questionnaires Completed 1970-71 Academic Session

Month	No. of Withdrawals	Males	Percentage	Females	Percentage
Sept. (13th to 30th)	63	25	40	38	60
October	138	84	60	54	40
November	109	74	68	35	32
December	89	64	72	25	28
January	95	63	66	32	34
February	64	45	70	19	30
March	45	28	62	17	38
April (1st to 8th)	11	7	64	4	36
	614	390	64	224	36

TABLE 3
Withdrawals by School or Faculty

	Number of Withdrawals	Percentage of Withdrawal Sample	Total Faculty Enrollment	Withdrawals as Percentage of Faculty Enrollment
Arts	172	28.0	3,091	5.6
Science	139	22.6	2,830	4.9
Education	105	17.1	4,236	2.5
Engineering	67	10.9	1,380	4.9
Commerce	41	6.7	1,118	3.7
Physical Education	26	4.2	598	4.3
Agriculture	19	3.1	422	4.5
Household Economics	9	1.5	324	2.8
Law	8	1.3	366	2.2
Nursing	8	1.3	240	3.3
Medicine	5	.8	589	.8
Pharmacy	5	.8	303	1.7
Rehabilitation Medicine	4	.7	215	1.9
Dental Hygiene	2	.3	50	4.0
Dentistry	1	.2	197	.5
Medical Laboratory Science	1	.2	88	1.1
Not stated	2	.3		
	614			

look at the withdrawal rates for each month of the term indicate that a greater proportion of women withdrew early in the term, and as the term progresses, the ratio for males increases.

Table 3 shows the withdrawal figures broken down by faculty and indicates the withdrawal rates from each faculty in relation to the faculty enrollment. As was expected, the larger faculties contribute the greatest number of withdrawals. In fact, if the combined enrollment and withdrawal figures are compared for the five large faculties — Arts, Commerce, Education, Engineering, and Sciences — the five account for approximately 69 percent of the total enrollment and 85 percent of the total withdrawals. Since the withdrawal sample overall represents 3.3 percent of the total full-time enrollment for the university term, it is evident that the withdrawal rates from the various faculties are not at all equivalent. The Faculty of Arts ranks highest in terms of the proportion of withdrawals as well as in terms of the overall numbers of withdrawals. This may mean that more undecided students opt for admission to Arts (and Science as well) and may then be the first to feel the disillusionment with their university programs. The high incidence of early withdrawal from the Faculties of Arts and of Science gives further support to this assumption. The rate of withdrawal from the Faculty of Education is relatively lower, in spite of the questionable employment possibilities in the profession at present. An alternative impression might be that students in this area tend to be more accepting of the curricular demands and thus

more willing to continue with their programs. The fields of medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy produce the least attrition. Reasons for this may relate both to the high commitment of students enrolled in these areas as well as the type of selection for admission to the programs.

While not shown in Table 3, the trends of withdrawal appeared to vary throughout the university session as comparisons were made among faculties. For the most part the withdrawal rates appear greatest very early in the university session. The trend was particularly apparent for the Faculties of Arts, Science, and Commerce, and, to some extent, Education, although here the trend appeared to repeat itself in the second half of the term. This early trend in withdrawal may suggest a quick disillusionment with university and a lack of inclination to desire to make much out of it. The trend in the Faculty of Engineering appears quite different. Here the impact builds up toward the middle of the session and then tails off. This trend may well be related to the impact of the midterm examinations. Whether deliberate or not, these exams do appear to be associated in time, to suggest that they may be the students' first formidable barrier in the weeding-out process.

TABLE 4
Withdrawals by Year of Program

	Totals	Percentage
First year	284	46.0
Second year	174	28.0
Third year	100	16.0
Fourth year	28	5.0
Fifth year	3	.5
Graduate	21	3.0
Not specified	4	.7
	614	

Table 4 shows the number of withdrawals by year of registration. The summary percentages indicate that approximately half of the students withdrawing are withdrawing from first year (46 percent). The bulk of withdrawals by age are in the 18-20 year-old category in line with the figures on year of program withdrawal. As such, age does not appear to be an independent factor. The rate of attrition for first-year students continues to appear out of line even in terms of enrollment. According to figures furnished by the registrar, there were 5,188 full-time first-year students enrolled in university. In terms of the total enrollment of 18,337 students, this figure represents approximately 28 percent, and can be compared to first-year students making up 46 percent of the total number of withdrawals. On the other hand, approximately 28 percent of the total were enrolled beyond third year, while less than 10 percent of the withdrawals were from this

group. Approximately 24 percent of the total enrolment were second-year students compared with 28 percent of the withdrawals and 20 percent of the total enrollment were registered in third year with 16 percent of the withdrawals being third-year students. Thus, it becomes apparent that with each successive university year the probability for attrition tends to decrease.

Reasons for Withdrawal

Table 5 summarizes the reasons for withdrawal given by the 614 respondents. As is evident from the table, personal reasons rank as

TABLE 5
Reasons for Withdrawal

	Frequency of Students Checking Relevant (N=614)	Percentage	Weighted Average*
Personal Reasons	457	74.6	2.57
Academic Reasons	381	62.1	3.3
Financial Reasons	159	25.9	4.66
Extracurricular Reasons	105	17.1	4.97
Health Reasons	94	15.3	5.23
Unsatisfactory Living	84	13.7	5.26

*Based on a 1 to 6 scale: 1 = completely relevant
6 = completely irrelevant

TABLE 6
Specific Complaints Checked as Relevant to the
Decision to Withdraw Under the
"Personal Reasons" Category

Complaint	Number of Students Checking Item as Relevant (N=614)	Percentage
Unmotivated	267	43.4
Restlessness	228	37.1
Boredom	194	31.5
Attending university to satisfy others	186	30.2
No goals to work toward	166	27.0
Upset by impersonal atmosphere of the university	83	13.5
Distressing interpersonal relationships	75	12.2
Lack self-control	74	12.0
Family distress	69	11.2
Afraid of competition and/or failure	67	10.9
Loneliness	63	10.2
Found a good job	46	7.5
Leaving to get married	30	4.9
Pregnancy	20	3.3
No friends, no one to talk to	19	3.1
Other	113	18.4

the most obviously relevant category with academic reasons the second most important category. The remaining categories appear of far less relevance in the decision to withdraw. While not included in Table 5,

TABLE 7
Specific Complaints Checked as Relevant to the
Decision to Withdraw Under the
"Academic Reasons" Category

Complaint	Number of Students checking item as relevant (N = 614)	Percentage
Program turned out to be not what anticipated	229	37.2
Course work irrelevant	199	32.4
Lack of study habits	197	32.0
Failing or not likely to meet required standards	190	30.9
Wrong choice of faculty	168	27.3
Impersonal atmosphere in class and on campus	138	22.4
Course work more difficult than expected	127	20.7
Ineffective instructors	123	20.0
University system lacking in humanity and understanding	71	11.5
Administrative difficulties	19	3.1
Other	92	15.0

TABLE 8
Specific Complaints Checked as Relevant to the
Decision to Withdraw Under the
"Financial Reasons" Category

Complaint	Number of Students Checking Item as Relevant (N = 614)	Percentage
Family unable to provide financial assistance	89	14.5
Could have gotten a loan but didn't want to go into debt	70	11.4
Obtained financial assistance but not enough	63	10.2
Encountered unexpected emergency expenses	60	9.8
Unable to obtain financial assistance from parents	50	8.1
Not able to get summer employment	30	4.9
Unable to get assistance from the University, Student Assistance Board, or Awards Office	23	3.7
Unable to obtain funds from other sources	21	3.4
Other	83	13.5

the close study of the weighted averages by month show that academic, extracurricular, and health reasons become increasingly relevant in the withdrawal decision as the term progresses. The other three categories of personal, financial, and living arrangements remain stable over the academic session.

Tables 6 to 8 provide the summary of the frequency of specific complaint items checked within the broad categories. These tabulations have been calculated on the total sample of 614 subjects across all faculties and are presented in descending order of importance. It is apparent that the first three choices presented in Table 6 are those which received the highest number of responses. Each reflects a lack of personal enthusiasm and commitment. The fourth response in this list also received a great number of responses and tends to reflect the external pressure that students have placed upon them, primarily by their families. With others on the list, the impression is that many students experience a sense of alienation in the academic world, and this sense evidently becomes a part of the rationale for leaving university.

According to Table 7, the areas listed under the "Academic Reasons" category receiving greatest attention are those suggesting that what the student encounters in a university program does not meet his prior expectations. The suggestion is that significant numbers of students withdraw from university because they see themselves as having made bad choices, because the course work is perceived as irrelevant, or because of difficulty in meeting required academic standards. Much less relevant, but also worth noting are those areas where students project their difficulties onto institutional inadequacies, primarily ineffective instructors.

The most striking indication according to the distribution of complaints checked in the "Financial Reasons" category (Table 8) is that students choose not to obtain financial assistance, particularly where this means going into debt. For the most part, the entire area of financial reasons appears much less relevant than might have been anticipated.

The incidence of response problems listed in the remaining primary reason areas tended to be quite small. One of the complaint items in the "Extracurricular Reasons" category was "insufficient time to pursue hobbies, interests, etc." This item was checked by approximately 16 percent of the respondents. Evidently, there is some reluctance to give up certain time and energy of commitment priorities for the sake of the university demands. Approximately 12 percent of the respondents checked the complaint, "living at home is unsatisfactory" from the "Unsatisfactory Living Arrangements" category. No other type of living arrangement produced this kind of apparent stress. Perhaps this reason along with "attending university to satisfy others" may be producing a great deal of stress for some students. The only other area receiving significant attention was "am having a personal health problem." This area was listed in the "Health Reasons" category. Within this area students were requested to specify the

nature of the problem, and many of those listed indicated problems of a personal/emotional nature.

Discussion

Some of the reasons most often given for withdrawal seem to reflect more strongly on the individual student's personal adjustment, maturity level, etc., and not necessarily on the character of the institution. This would include such statements as "unmotivated, restlessness, boredom, attending university to satisfy others, lack of goals, and lack of study habits." It's difficult to comment on items like "coursework irrelevant" or "program not what anticipated." "Irrelevant" has such an individualistic meaning and a charge of irrelevance may reflect inferior teaching or, instead, some rather misguided expectations on the part of the student in the first place.

Items clearly condemnatory of the university are certainly represented but not to nearly the degree that might have been expected — e.g. "ineffective instructors," "university system lacking in humanity and understanding," "impersonal atmosphere in class and on campus," and "administrative difficulties." These items are given much less frequently than ones placing the onus on the students themselves as is evident by their consistently lower placement in Table 6. The high incidence of such reasons as "poor motivation," "restlessness," and "lack of study habits" suggest that the university may be attracting and admitting a number of students poorly suited by temperament to university studies in the first place, a not unlikely possibility in a society valuing education so highly. The fact that 30 percent of the respondents indicated that they were "attending university to satisfy others," attests to the types of pressure that may force poorly suited candidates to pursue further academic learning. Items such as "program turned out to be not what anticipated," "lack of study habits," "wrong choice of faculty," "course work irrelevant," and "no goals to work toward" probably are as much an indictment of the secondary-school system as of the university. There is obviously a big job to be done in making potential university students aware of the numerous possibilities open to them, the nature of and content of specific programs of study, and the level at which a student must be able to compete in order to be able to be successful.

It has become increasingly popular in recent years to criticize universities for not adequately meeting the educational expectations and learning needs of students. Universities certainly must strive more earnestly to train and attract exciting teaching personnel, to provide comprehensive and up-to-date information on choice and content of programs to the public, and to provide comprehensive counselling services to their student bodies. However, universities have to be seen by the public as representing only one desirable post-secondary educational alternative to the needs of the more adept and achievement-oriented student.

The fact that the bulk of withdrawing students are first-year students and just out of high school raises the problem of how ready

many of these young people are to commit themselves to long-range goals. Emotionally many feel an external pressure to continue their education which runs directly counter to their felt need to explore themselves and the world. Many of the uncommitted entrants appear to enter general programs in the university and it is these faculties that show the highest withdrawal rates. Perhaps students should receive greater encouragement to delay their decision to enter university if that is their inclination so as to allow them an opportunity to travel, work, and "grow" for a period free of academic demands. Also, if students were permitted to pursue university studies in line with the degree of commitment they are prepared to make, attrition would probably lessen. Specifically, it is felt that entering students should be able to pursue their studies on a part-time basis and there should be a wide degree of flexibility in terms of the programs they can plan in first and second year. This would allow students to explore their interests without unnecessary pressure or the fear of failure.

Many of the withdrawing students reacted to the fact that the academic pressures they experienced in university were greater than they had anticipated. This might be associated with the way the university presents itself to potential students. The emphasis seems to be primarily on the goals or outcome of a university education rather than on the process. For example, a student is much more likely to be informed of the kind of job he can look forward to upon graduation, rather than the type of learning experience that he will encounter during his years of training. It is highly likely that a large number of students enter the university community with no idea of what to expect. The professional programs that screen students prior to admission, by contrast, seem to have a reputation for making strong academic demands and therefore attract students with realistic expectations.

By way of a final observation, the function of attrition is obviously not to eliminate the students who are unable to achieve in a university setting. Data on the present sample from the Department of Institutional Planning and Research indicates that the prior academic achievement level of the withdrawing students is comparable to the achievement level of students not withdrawing.

RESUME: On a administré un questionnaire à 614 étudiants de l'Université de l'Alberta qui ont abandonné leurs études durant la session d'hiver 1970-71. Outre les informations biographiques, on a groupé les motifs d'abandon en six catégories: les motifs économiques, académiques, personnels, extracurriculaires, la santé et les conditions de vie. Les résultats ont montré que la distribution des abandons selon le sexe était très semblable à celle des inscriptions. Le taux d'abandon des étudiants inscrits dans des programmes de formation professionnelle était moins élevé que celui des autres étudiants. La plupart des cas d'abandon était le fait d'étudiants de première année. En général cela s'était produit durant la première partie de la session. Le principal motif allégué était celui des raisons personnelles, suivi de près par le motif académique. Les autres raisons furent très peu mentionnées. On a présenté une discussion de ces résultats en tenant compte des programmes d'études, des pressions familiales et sociales et des besoins des étudiants.