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COLLEGE DROPOUTS: A VIEW FROM TWO SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT: A questionnaire was administered to students who withdrew from two academic institutions — a teachers' college and a state university — to study their reasons for leaving. The responses were classified into five categories: academic, health and family, financial, school environment, and other. The most important reason for students' withdrawal appeared to be their feeling that the institution did not offer an academic experience that met their personal objectives.

It is sometimes stated that small colleges and larger universities are quite different in terms of their student populations. Certainly, there are dimensions within which this concept is true, but a view of college dropouts taken from two such schools seems to indicate greater similarity than difference among populations who leave school (Brooks, 1972; Emery, 1973).

This comparison was not done by means of replication. Although similar instruments and procedures were used, they were not identical. However, the authors were struck by the overall sameness exhibited by students who left their schools.

PROCEDURES

In an effort to obtain data on Nova Scotia Teachers College (NSTC) students who failed to complete course work during the period 1969-1971, a questionnaire was mailed to 72 people. This figure represents only students who withdrew from the College, not those

who failed to return for any reason. Thirty-three questionnaires were completed for a return of 46 percent. One form was only partially completed, but was used for the first part of the study.

The questionnaire was intended to gather information which would indicate to some extent the nature of help students perceived they needed and the help they actually received. The questionnaire used was a slightly modified version of one developed at Simon Fraser University for a similar study (McIntosh, B., Wilson, L., Lipinski, B. G., & Lipinski, E., 1971).

The form elicits a variety of data including age, reasons for leaving college, sources of help utilized while in college, future plans, and perceived wisdom of choice.

Between September, 1971, and May, 1972, there were 219 students who withdrew from the State University College at Oneonta, New York (SUCO). A questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 150 of these students. Eighty forms were completed for a return of 53.3 percent. This study covered only an eight-month period, unlike the previous study; however, results are comparable.

The questionnaire used at SUCO was developed based partially on a U.S. government report dealing with college students (Iffert & Clarke, 1965). Again, much of the questionnaire dealt with the reasons for school-leaving.

RESULTS

Table I presents a composite picture of the reasons students withdrew. On the NSTC questionnaire, respondents were asked to check one or more of the areas listed on the form. The item was an open-ended statement which read, "I left Teachers College because..."

The SUCO study asked respondents to name the *one* most important reason for leaving. It also asked them to check one or more statements which characterized their reactions to SUCO.

In order to make comparisons, the format of the SUCO study has been used, breaking the areas for school-leaving into the categories Academic, Health and Family, Financial, School Environment, and Other.

Nova Scotia Teachers College responses were then assigned to a SUCO area based on the authors' judgement as to where the NSTC responses fit. One can quarrel with this approach in that judgements were subjective. Because the questionnaires were different, respondents may have been dealing with different realities. However, the authors believe that trends are apparent, despite methodological differences, and these trends are reflections of students' responses to a generally same reality.

Two points must be emphasized in reviewing the results:

First, in reading Table I, note that the first column refers to the *one* most important reason for students leaving school. The other two columns refer to responses in which *more than one* item could have been chosen. For the SUCO study, this helps explain the apparent difference between a response such as "Poor Grades," 2.5

Table 1
Reasons for Leaving College or University, in percentages

| | SUCO — ONE MOST IMPORTANT REASON | | NSTC — I LEFT BECAUSE I... | | SUCO — STATEMENT OF COLLEGE EXPERIENCES | |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|---|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| | (n = 80) | Percent- age | (n = 33) | Percent- age | (n = 80) | Percent- age |
| ACADEMIC | Dissatisfaction with major | 17.5 | Felt I was better suited to non-university training | 27 | I was dissatisfied with some of my teachers | 50.0 |
| | Change to curriculum not at SUCO | 6.3 | Was concerned about the quality of NSTC degrees | 18 | I transferred from a two-year school and did not like SUCO | 15.0 |
| | Lack of desired courses | 2.5 | Was concerned about problems with transfer of credits | 6 | My grades were too low | 12.5 |
| | Poor grades | 2.5 | Wasn't making it academically | 15 | I was not sufficiently interested in my studies | 50.0 |
| | Lack of direction | 23.0 | Was confused about vocational plans | 39 | I had no clear educational objectives | 42.5 |
| | Lack of motivation | 1.2 | Saw it all as pointless | 27 | | |
| | | | Couldn't concentrate | 27 | | |
| HEALTH AND FAMILY | Health | 5.0 | Felt T-C was irrelevant to my personal objectives | 42 | | |
| | Marriage | 11.2 | Was in poor health | 15 | I planned to be married and could not stay at SUCO | 8.7 |
| | | | Had family difficulty, illness, etc. | 12 | | |
| | | | Was upset and worried | 36 | | |
| FINANCIAL | Lack of funds | 3.7 | Had marriage plans | 6 | | |
| | Had to go to work | 1.2 | Needed money | 6 | I had difficulty meeting financial costs | 23.7 |
| SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT | Location of school | 7.5 | | | My social activities were too limited | 21.2 |
| | Unhappy here | 12.5 | Felt no one seemed to care what I was doing | 6 | I became involved in too many non-academic activities | 6.2 |
| | Lack of social life | 1.2 | Felt lonely and isolated | 24 | I became overly involved with drugs | 3.7 |
| | Didn't like dorms | 1.2 | Lack of social amenities on campus | 0 | | |
| | | | Campus unrest | 3 | | |
| OTHER | | 1.2 | Needed time out | 12 | | |
| | | | T-C was irrelevant to society's needs | 9 | | |

percent, and "My grades were too low," 12.5 percent. Many students felt their grades were too low, but a much lower percentage singled this out as the major reason for withdrawing. Second, it must be recognized that hard and fast comparisons are impossible. However, broad trends can be seen which indicate students are alike in several ways.

It quickly became apparent that the largest single reason given for students' leaving school is broadly termed Academic. Under this heading personal educational objectives were considered, and approximately 42.0 percent of the students on both campuses felt either that the school was irrelevant to their objectives (NSTC), or that they themselves had no clear educational objectives (SUCO). In this regard, too, it was reported by 39 percent of the NSTC students that they left because they were confused about vocational plans. At SUCO, 50 percent of the students reported they were not sufficiently interested in their studies.

For SUCO, 23 percent of the students reported they lacked direction and 27 percent of the NSTC students reported they left because they saw it all as pointless.

While only 2.5 percent of SUCO students named poor grades as the *most* important reason for leaving, both NSTC students (15 percent) and SUCO students (12.5 percent) indicated they were not making it academically, or their grades were too low.

Less than 20 percent of the students on either campus indicated health as a major reason for leaving, but NSTC was higher with 15 percent of the students reporting they had left because they were in poor health. Only 5 percent of the SUCO group reported health problems. Marriage was a factor for 6 percent at NSTC and 8.7 percent at SUCO. Oddly 11.2 percent of the SUCO respondents gave this as the one most important reason.

Some 23.7 percent of SUCO students felt they had difficulty meeting financial costs. However, when looking at whether or not this was the most important reason for leaving, a total of only 5 percent indicated lack of funds or having to go to work as the major reason. This total compares with 6 percent of NSTC students who said they left because they needed money.

Personal unhappiness, feelings of loneliness and isolation, and the feeling that no one seemed to care what they were doing contributed to the withdrawal of 12.5 percent of SUCO students and 24 percent and 6 percent NSTC students respectively.

Although 21.2 percent of SUCO students felt their social activities were too limited, only 1.2 percent of SUCO students left because of the lack of social life. No students at NSTC reported leaving because they felt there were too few social amenities on campus.

DISCUSSION

Reasons for leaving college or university vary among students, but it is possible to note areas in which students seem to encounter more difficulty than others. It seems evident, from the above comparisons,

that many students on both campuses leave because their academic life is not what they feel it should be. Specific academic problems are not mentioned, but general feelings of confusion, irrelevance, and pointlessness seem to mark the dropout's foray into academic life. While low grades may account for some of these feelings, it seems more probable to think that confusion and low interest preceded poor academic performance.

The school environment, at least how the student views it, accounts for some withdrawals. Students on both campuses reported feeling either unhappiness or loneliness. Some students felt no one was interested in them or cared what they were doing. Yet unlike academics, which counted for as much as 50 percent of the reason for withdrawing, the school environment affected under 25 percent of both populations. Even though some students felt unhappy, a smaller number reported lack of social opportunity as a problem. One could hypothesize that the groups were composed of rather introverted students whose generally introspective nature allowed them to recognize feelings of unhappiness, but prevented them from moving toward new people and situations to overcome these feelings. This seems to be supported by the fact that 21.2 percent of SUCO students felt they engaged in too few social activities even though only 1.2 percent felt there was a lack of social life available to them.

Health and family plans affected a smaller percentage of students overall than did the school environment, except for 36 percent of NSTC students who felt upset and worried. Possibly this response could be seen to relate more closely to school environment and whether or not the student felt he was happy. Both campuses show that less than 20 percent of withdrawals reported health problems.

Money is often cited as a reason for students leaving school. However, both campuses studied show that at the highest, only 6 percent of NSTC students left for financial reasons. It is true the 23.7 percent of SUCO students had difficulty meeting costs, but neither school showed a percentage above 6 percent of students withdrawing due to a lack of money.

Surely the most pressing reason for students leaving school has to do with their feelings about the worth of the venture when measured against their personal objectives. One outcome of this comparison might be a more careful attempt to aid students to discover their interests and values before they enter college. Perhaps a year of work or travel does much to help the prospective student fit some missing pieces into his personal jigsaw puzzle, but this kind of experience may be too chancy. Is it possible, perhaps, to develop a meaningful pre-college experience which could help the student clarify his goals before he sets foot on campus? If not, colleges and universities may have to accept the fact that they are the arena in which the student's personal developmental fight will be waged. And if they accept this premise, new ways must be found to help the student define himself without the penalties of fear and failure.

RESUME: Afin d'étudier leurs motifs d'abandon, on a administré un questionnaire à des étudiants qui s'étaient retirés de deux instituts académiques — une école normale et une université d'état —. On a classifié les réponses en cinq catégories: académique, santé et famille, financière, l'environnement scolaire, autre. Le sentiment que l'institution ne leur offrait pas une expérience académique satisfaisant leurs objectifs personnels est apparu comme la raison la plus importante du retrait des étudiants.

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