Community College Journal of Research and Practice
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ucjc20

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Published online: 09 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Karen A. Conklin (1997) COURSE ATTRITION: A 5-YEAR PERSPECTIVE ON WHY STUDENTS DROP CLASSES, Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 21:8, 753-759, DOI: 10.1080/1066892970210807

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1066892970210807

COURSE ATTRITION: A 5-YEAR PERSPECTIVE ON WHY STUDENTS DROP CLASSES

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This article describes results of an ongoing course attrition study conducted at 1 large, suburban community college. The study was designed to determine which classes were most often dropped, reasons students cited for deciding to drop classes, and other factors that may have impacted decisions to drop. The findings that indicate factors over which the college had little control were the most frequently cited reasons for dropping classes—work conflicts and personal problems. However, factors over which the college may have some control also appeared to contribute to decisions to drop classes in a substantial number of instances. The impact of findings from these studies and changes in methodology and survey design over time will provide institutional researchers with helpful suggestions for implementing similar studies at their institutions.

The decade of the 1990s is already fulfilling its promise of being a challenging time for institutions of higher education, and student retention is perhaps one of the most challenging issues of all. Clearly colleges and universities are doing a fine job of marketing and recruitment. College enrollments have increased from 12.4 million students in 1982 to 14.5 million in 1992 (+ 17%). The greatest increase appears to have been among 18-to-24-year-olds, who comprise the majority of full-time students in most institutions. In 1982, less than 27% of 18-to-24-year-olds were enrolled in college, and by 1992, over 34% were college students (Proportion, 1994).

But how successful are these students at completing their education, one course at a time? Is there more we, as educators, can do to assist students in successfully completing their courses? Clearly, class withdrawals are costly to the student in terms of time, money, and effort expended. Withdrawals are also a source of frustration to the faculty when they see that their efforts have not culminated in successful

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Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 21:753–759, 1997

1066-8926/97 $12.00 + .00

completion, and withdrawals are a source of frustration to students shut out of closed sections who would have loved to have had the opportunity to enroll instead of the student who ultimately withdrew. This study addresses the issue of why students drop courses, and what interventions might enhance their ability to successfully complete them instead.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have been conducted on attrition and retention as a whole (Alfred, 1974; Baird, 1991; Brunner, 1978; Pascarella, 1982; Tinto, 1987; Willett, 1983), but few studies have directly addressed reasons why students drop classes. An ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) search uncovered only two course attrition studies conducted at the community college level since 1980. One was conducted by San Jose City College in 1990–1991 to determine reasons for withdrawal from three courses, and it also explored specific behaviors of students who dropped classes compared with those who persevered. Of particular note were results that indicated 71% of those interviewed considered dropping within the first 4 weeks of class, 85% did not talk to their instructor about withdrawing from class, 84% worked 40 or more hours per week (compared with only 45% of successful students), and 89% studied alone (compared with 57% of successful students; Kangas, 1991). These findings, if substantiated at other institutions, may suggest the potential for policy changes and intervention processes.

The other study was conducted at John Wood Community College's (JWCC) Open Learning Center in fall of 1981 and was limited to students enrolled in one of four courses only. Results of that study were inconclusive.

THE JOHNSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DROP STUDY

In spring of 1988, a study was initiated at a suburban Midwestern community college, to (a) document the primary reasons students drop classes, (b) analyze possibilities for helpful interventions, (c) identify high attrition classes, and (d) analyze reasons for high course attrition rates.

Methodology

A short survey was administered to all students requesting a change in schedule at the Admissions and Records offices during both fall and spring terms from Spring 1988 through Spring 1993 and during fall terms only thereafter. Confidential reports were provided annually to

the dean of instruction and to the academic vice president, and division-specific data were provided to each division director. These reports included reasons for dropping courses, detailed lists of high-attrition classes (defined as a 40% or higher attrition rate in classes of 10 or more students), comparisons of reasons for dropping all classes with reasons for dropping high-attrition classes, comparisons of the number and percent of high-attrition classes in each division with college totals, comparisons of the division-attrition rates with the college attrition rates, and verbatim comments.

The survey instrument has undergone three revisions. The first survey, used in the spring and fall of 1988, was a half sheet form describing 10 typical reasons students drop classes, with no space for additional comments. From Spring 1989 through Spring 1993, a second survey was used, which added "financial difficulties" as a potential reason for dropping a course and requested suggestions for specific actions the college could have taken, which would have resulted in successful completion of the course.

In fall of 1993, the survey was revised to a scannable form. Two additional potential reasons were added, "moving" and "course will not transfer," and the decision was made to collect the data during the fall term only. The final revision was accomplished in the fall of 1994 when the reasons for dropping a course were incorporated into the drop form itself, thus guaranteeing all students the opportunity to state their reasons for dropping a course. Thus, although response and data entry formats have been revised over the past several years, the survey items themselves have remained essentially the same.

Problem Areas

Personnel in the Admissions and Records offices were responsible for administering these surveys to all students who were dropping courses and, in most instances, this was handled in an efficient manner. However, considerable variation in the response rate was evident from term to term, depending on staff changes in the Admissions and Records offices and the degree to which the importance of the study was stressed. The problem has been resolved with incorporation of the drop survey questions into the official college drop form.

The scannable forms proved to be problematic because of the necessity of carefully reviewing each form to insure "bubbles" were completely filled in. Another unforeseen problem was the tendency of the glue residue resulting from the padding process to jam the scanner. Thus, standard data entry may be considered less time consuming and more efficient than using scannable forms for this project in some instances.

Although it is too early to effectively evaluate the latest survey format revisions, some questions exist on how efficient they will be. It is a three-part carbon form, with the last copy designated for Institutional Research (IR). If the student did not press down hard enough when filling out the form, this last copy is indecipherable. Students were also encouraged to write comments on the back of the form; unfortunately, without regard to the effect the carbon paper would have on the IR copy.

Results

The percent of students who dropped courses remained fairly consistent over time at about 15% to 16% of total enrollments, and the percent of high attrition classes fluctuated between 3% and 4% of the total classes offered at the college. Some variation from these college norms were evident between divisions, prompting inquiries into potential reasons for these variations. Changes in staffing, scheduling, and curriculum have been addressed where appropriate.

The top five reasons students cited for dropping classes remained consistent throughout the study (Table 1) and were similar to reasons cited in other studies. Of particular note are the variations between reasons cited by all respondents and those cited by respondents who had been enrolled in high attrition classes (Table 2). Also noteworthy are the substantial differences in the percent of students dropping classes for a

TABLE 1 Why students drop classes: 5-year comparison

Reason	Fall 1989 (n = 2,917)	Fall 1991 (n = 6,064)	Fall 1993 (n = 2,682)
Work schedule conflicts	33.6%	34.6%	30.6%
Bad time/inconvenient	20.9	21.4	22.0
Personal problems	18.2	18.8	17.7
Too hard/bad grades	17.0	15.8	14.7
Disliked instructor	12.1	11.7	13.4
Courseload too heavy	13.8	11.2	10.0
Disliked course	8.5	7.3	8.1
Financial difficulties	7.0	7.7	7.5
Physical problems/illness	7.3	8.1	6.8
Not needed for major	7.1	6.5	5.4
Moving	n.a.	n.a.	4.7
Too easy/boring	3.1	2.6	2.9
Course will not transfer	n.a.	n.a.	1.8
Other	11.1	5.8	9.9

Note: Multiple response item; percentages are not additive.

TABLE 2 Why students drop classes: Fall 1993 comparison of respondents in high-attrition classes with all respondents

Reason	All respondents (n = 2,682)	High attrition respondents (n = 217)
Work schedule conflicts	30.6%	24.9%
Bad time/inconvenient	22.0	15.7
Personal problems	17.7	13.8
Too hard/bad grades	14.7	24.0
Disliked instructor	13.4	18.0
Courseload to heavy	10.0	12.4
Disliked course	8.1	9.7
Financial difficulties	7.5	6.9
Physical problems/illness	6.8	4.6
Not needed for major	5.4	2.8
Moving	4.7	2.8
Too easy/boring	2.9	2.3
Course will not tranfser	1.8	0.0
Other	9.9	9.7

Note. Multiple response item; percentages are not additive.

particular reason within certain divisions compared with the college as a whole.

Although "work schedule conflicts" and "personal problems," the two most-often cited reasons for dropping classes, are areas over which the college has little control, efforts have been made to expand pre-enrollment counseling and advisement to explore potential roadblocks to successful course completion with incoming students.

Caveats

Drop study data can be invaluable in documenting problem areas, addressing needed changes in policy and procedure, and enhancing the educational environment. However, caution should be exercised in working with faculty and staff on these issues, particularly those whose classes appear on the high attrition lists, due to the potential for eliciting faculty defensiveness or resentment, inadvertently encouraging grade inflation, and lowering overall morale.

In all instances, caution must be exercised in appropriately interpreting drop study findings and in exploring all possible explanations for unsatisfactory results. Certainly if a primary reason for course withdrawal is cited again and again as "disliked instructor" or "disliked course," every effort should be made to assist that instructor to improve

his or her delivery method, and the curriculum may also warrant review and revision. Team efforts designed to enhance the entire educational setting can benefit from the richness of data available through the use of a properly conducted long-term drop study, provided results are kept confidential and used in the most positive manner possible.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Clearly, the drop study conducted over the years has benefited both the college and the students by documenting reasons students drop classes and suggesting interventions and changes in policy and procedure designed to enhance every student's opportunity to succeed. The survey instrument has undergone several revisions and will undoubtedly undergo several more as the college strives to maximize the reliability and usefulness of results.

Findings of a drop study, coupled with other measures of institutional effectiveness, can be utilized in a variety of ways. They can document student perceptions of the educational environment, identify potential areas for improvement, or suggest alternatives in policy and procedure that may enhance the rate of successful course completion. Division drop study findings, when compared with the college totals, may be used to enhance the quality of the curriculum and, in some instances, the quality of the faculty and administration as well.

When a substantial change in administrative instructional personnel occurs, sometimes drop study findings can be a helpful piece of information against which to compare performance of the new administrator with the old. High-attrition class lists, when compared with like courses offered at different times, can be used to improve course scheduling. When high-attrition class lists identify divisions and individual instructors with greater-than-average problems with retention, these data may initiate further research into the quality of remediation at the college and whether completers of remedial classes are adequately prepared to advance to the college-level coursework. They may also initiate fruitful discussions with faculty who can benefit from staff development designed to enhance their interpersonal and teaching skills.

Drop study results can add additional insights into effects of policy changes as well. For example, in the fall of 1993, the final date to withdraw from classes was changed from the end of the term to November 15 for fall and April 15 for spring. The drop study findings were invaluable in analyzing results of this policy change. Clearly, there is much potential for positive actions resulting from drop study findings.

The college is in the process of installing a new computer system capable of numerous functions that the old system could not handle

efficiently. As a result, the college will now have the capacity to easily do demographic comparisons of reasons students drop classes and to incorporate other variables into the drop study database that may impact decisions to drop classes. Thus, this article should be viewed as a "work in progress," not a completed model. Further research on reasons why students drop classes is recommended with a view toward eventual development of a workable model for interventions, policies, and procedures that maximize every student's opportunity for successful completion of all coursework attempted.

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