

## **Why Do Students Withdraw From Courses?**

Dr. Michelle Hall  
Director, Office of Institutional Research & Assessment

Kenneth Smith  
Research Associate

Donald Boeckman  
Research Associate

Vinay Ramachandra  
Institutional Database Coordinator

Jacob Jasin  
Statistical Assistant

Office of Institutional Research and Assessment  
Southeastern Louisiana University

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In the past several years, many state governments have imposed higher levels of accountability on higher education institutions. Now, as part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the federal government is contemplating imposing more accountability as well, and one of the measures being discussed is graduation rates (Burd, 2003). As graduation and retention rates become more of an issue on campus, one area that needs to be examined further is course withdrawals.

Withdrawal from a course can often have a negative impact on a student's progression. This will be particularly true if the course is the first in a sequence of required courses. A withdrawal in this case could set a student's graduation back a year or more. Although this is a major issue that schools face, very little research has been conducted and published regarding the reasons a student withdraws from a course. A review of recent literature reveals a dearth of articles. The most recent (Dunwoody & Frank, 1995) states "our review of the literature revealed that retention rates for individual classes have been ignored" (pg. 553). The remaining articles, such as Adams & Becker (1990) dealt mainly with demographic characteristics and how they relate to course withdrawal, very few looked at the students' reasons for course withdrawal.

Dunwoody & Frank (1995) did survey students and they found that the top five reasons students gave for withdrawing from courses are:

1. I was not happy with my grade
2. I didn't understand the material
3. I didn't like the course
4. I didn't like the professor
5. The subject did not interest me

At a mid-size public comprehensive university, this issue has been of concern to Deans and Department Heads. In addition to impeding student progress, course withdrawals hamper administrators' efforts to effectively utilize limited resources. First, some general statistical information on the number of students who withdraw, the number of courses they withdraw from and GPA consequences was provided. These analyses revealed that while the semester GPA of students who withdrew from a course was better than students who did not, the cumulative GPA was significantly lower. This emphasized the need for further investigation.

Because it was felt that the withdrawal rate at the institution was unacceptable, a committee (including the IR Director) was formed with the charge of reviewing course withdrawal information and making recommendations to help ameliorate the problem. First, more withdrawal data was analyzed, including withdrawals over time, what type of student was withdrawing, and at what point in the semester were they withdrawing. After reviewing the data, it became clear that what was needed to make any recommendations was information on why students were withdrawing and what might prevent excessive withdrawals. Thus, Institutional Research was asked to conduct a survey of students who had withdrawn during the Spring 2003 semester.

Shortly after the last day to withdraw from a course for the semester, a phone survey was conducted over a two and a half week period, during the day and evenings. Because several students withdrew from multiple courses, they were asked to answer the survey in regards to a particular course. Students who had completely resigned from the university were not included in the survey.

## **Participants**

The participants in this survey were 454 undergraduate students who withdrew from a course during Spring 2003. The sample was stratified by college of the course, gender, classification, standing, full vs. part time, and when they withdrew (prior to March 5, between March 5 and March 14, and after March 14). The refusal rate was approximately 5% (24 of the 478 students contacted refused to respond to the survey).

Fifty-eight percent (58%, n=265) of the respondents were female, and 42% (n=189) were male. Seventy-six percent (76%, n=347) were White, Non-Hispanic, 19% (n=87) were Black, Non-Hispanic, 3% (n=12) were Hispanic, .4% (n=2) were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% had an unknown race.

Ninety-five percent (95%, n=432) were enrolled as full-time students, and 5% (n=22) were enrolled as part-time students. On average, the respondents were enrolled for 14.5 hours prior to withdrawing from the course. The average cumulative GPA was 2.276 and the average ACT composite score was 19.4. The majority of the respondents (70%, n=320) were 23 or younger, with the average age being 23.0. The majority of respondents (37%) were freshmen, 25% were sophomores, 20% were juniors, and 19% were seniors.

## **Instrument**

The survey contained five sections. The first asked whether they had participated in early registration. The second question asked how long after they decided to withdraw from a class did they officially withdraw. The third question gave a list of fourteen possible reasons why a student might withdraw from a course and asked participants to rate whether it was a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason at all. This section included items such as: course was too difficult for me, did not like the instructor, and realized after classes started that I didn't need the course. The fourth question asked if there was any other reason they might have withdrawn from the course. The final question asked how effective six potential policy changes would be in discouraging them to withdraw from a course. The entire survey can be found in Appendix A.

## **Results**

The majority of the respondents, (68.7%) participated in Spring Early Registration during Fall 2003. Participants were asked when they officially withdrew from the course. Slightly more than half (51.5%) indicated that they officially withdrew from class right after they decided to

withdraw, while 48.5% indicated they stopped attending and withdrew later. The 220 students who indicated they withdrew later were then asked how long it was between the time they stopped attending and the time they officially withdrew. Almost 10%, (9.6%) were unsure of how long they waited before officially withdrawing. Below is the length of time the remaining respondents indicated they waited:

- 1 Week or less - 28.3%
- 2 Weeks - 31.0%
- 3 Weeks - 10.5%
- 4 Weeks - 13.2%
- 5-6 Weeks - 2.3%
- 7 Weeks (went the first week of class, waited to drop until last week) - 5.0%

Respondents were then presented with a list of potential reasons students withdraw from a class, and were asked to indicate whether each was a Major Reason, a Minor Reason, or Not a Reason for their withdrawing from class. The main reason students indicated they dropped a course was because they were doing poorly in the class. The least likely reason for a student to drop was because they were saving a seat for a friend. Table 1 provides the reasons presented, and the percent of students who endorsed each as a Major Reason, a Minor Reason, or Not a Reason for their withdrawing from class.

**Table 1**  
**Reasons for Withdrawing from a Course**

	<b>Not a Reason</b>	<b>Minor Reason</b>	<b>Major Reason</b>
Was doing poorly in the class	56.2%	16.7%	27.1%
Course was too difficult for me	61.0%	22.0%	17.0%
Did not like the instructor	63.0%	13.2%	23.8%
Thought the class was boring	69.4%	17.6%	13.0%
Fell behind in class assignments	70.5%	14.3%	15.2%
Did not have time for the class, due to work	71.4%	10.6%	18.1%
Registered for extra courses so I could withdraw from one	74.4%	13.9%	11.7%
Realized I did not have the background the course required	74.4%	16.1%	9.5%
I missed too many days	77.3%	9.7%	13.0%
Did not know my work schedule when I registered	79.3%	11.5%	9.3%
Realized after classes started that I didn't need the course	80.8%	7.9%	11.2%
Did not like the location of the class	84.6%	12.3%	3.1%
My instructor advised me to withdraw	88.5%	6.4%	5.1%
Registered for a course to save a seat for a friend with a later appointment	97.4%	2.6%	0.0%

Students who indicated that they had registered for extra courses so they could withdraw from one where asked how they decided which course to withdraw from. The majority of the respondents to this item (n=114) indicated they dropped the course in which they were doing the worst (27.2%). An additional 17.5% indicated they dropped the one at the most inconvenient time, 14.0% dropped the one they did not need or was not in their major, 12.2% dropped the one that was the hardest or required the most work, and 11.4% dropped the course/instructor they liked the least or was the most boring. An additional 17.5% indicated various reasons, such as the one with the most absences, the fewest hours, the term two course, etc.

The next question asked respondents if there was any other reason why they withdrew from the course. Two hundred and ten of the respondents provided an additional reason. The most commonly cited reason (19.0%) was due to some type of dissatisfaction with the teacher. This included dissatisfaction with the grading, the teaching methods, and faculty attitudes and/or behavior. This was followed by health reasons and/or family obligations, which was indicated by 14.3% of those who responded to this question. An additional 12.4% of the respondents indicated that they dropped the course due to the time of the course, either they did not like the

time of day it was offered, or it conflicted with other obligations, including other courses. More than ten percent (10.5%) dropped the course because they felt it was too difficult, it was too much work, or they were concerned with their grade in the course.

While endorsed by fewer respondents, five other categories of responses emerged. Several (5.7%) respondents indicated that they had registered for more hours than they could handle and had to withdraw from the course. About four percent (4.3%) of the respondents withdrew from the course because they changed their major, or decided to drop a minor or double degree. Furthermore, 3.8% of the respondents indicated they withdrew because it was an Internet course, and the same percent withdrew because of language problems, they could not understand the instructor. Finally, 2.4% indicated they had to withdraw from the course due to transportation problems.

The majority of the reasons given (23.8%) fell into a miscellaneous category, in which only one or two respondents provided a particular reason for withdrawing from a course.

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate how effective six potential policy changes were in changing the likelihood of their dropping a course. The most effective change would be to take away all Southeastern scholarships if a student has more than five withdrawals during their academic career. The least effective change would be to charge additional tuition for more than 12 hours. Table 2 provides the potential policy changes, and the percent of respondents who indicated it would make them more likely to withdraw, less likely, or would not change the likelihood of withdrawing from a course. The potential policy changes are presented from most effective to least effective.

**Table 2**  
**Potential Policy Changes Regarding Withdrawing**

	<b>More Likely to Withdraw</b>	<b>No Change</b>	<b>Less Likely to Withdraw</b>
Losing all Southeastern scholarships if you have more than 5 withdrawals during your academic career	1.5%	19.8%	77.5%
Charging you a \$50 withdrawal fee per course	1.8%	23.8%	73.6%
Allowing you to get only a Freshmen hang tag if you have more than 2 withdrawals within two semesters	0.9%	30.0%	67.8%
Putting a W and whatever grade was earned at the time of withdrawal on your transcript	1.1%	43.2%	54.6%
Requiring you to discuss the withdrawal with a counselor before it is approved	2.0%	54.6%	42.3%
Charging you additional tuition for more than 12 hours	20.9%	46.5%	31.7%

### **Discussion**

Results of the survey were enlightening, and dispelled several myths and misconceptions. For example, it was assumed that a lot of students just quit attending class during the first couple of weeks, but did not bother to officially withdraw until the last week to withdraw. Results indicated that this rarely occurs, and most students officially withdraw almost immediately after they decide to withdraw. This indicates that most students stay in the class for almost half the semester before making the decision to withdraw. Based on anecdotal evidence some administrators believed students register for a class with every intention of withdrawing in order to save the seat for a friend with a later registration appointment. The results of this survey indicate this rarely happens. Another misconception was that students routinely register for extra classes so that they can drop one. While this does occur, it is not as prevalent as believed.

Based on the results of the open-ended items, some areas that might need to be addressed in future surveys include fear of losing scholarships and health reasons. About a dozen students volunteered that they withdrew from a course because of a pregnancy. While this might not be a significant number of students, the number is probably higher because many would not volunteer this information.

After reviewing the results of this survey, the committee decided not to impose any penalties at this time, but rather implement some type of process to educate students on the potential impact of withdrawing from the course. The university is undergoing an extensive review of advising procedures and once a comprehensive advising policy is adopted, this education will be incorporated into the advising process. In addition, an extended orientation program is being

developed which includes on-line tutorials. Consequences of withdrawing from a course is being considered as one of the tutorials.

Because several of the major reasons for withdrawing from a course are related to the course itself or the instructor, the Deans were provided with a list of their courses with the corresponding withdrawal rate so that individual courses could be investigated at the college level. Also, Deans were given the option to receive withdrawal information at the section level to help determine if some faculty might need assistance in developing their courses.

### **References**

Burd, S. (2003). Bush's Next Target? The Chronicle of Higher Education. 49(44).

Dunwoody, P.T. & Frank, M.L. (1995). Why students withdraw from classes. The Journal of Psychology, 129(5), 553-558.

Adams, J.L. & Becker, W. E. (1990). Course withdrawals: A probit model and policy recommendations. Research in Higher Education, 31(5), 519-538.



**Appendix A**  
**Course Withdrawal Survey**

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am calling from the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at Southeastern Louisiana University. May I please speak with \_\_\_\_\_. We are conducting a survey of students who have withdrawn from a course. According to our records, you withdrew from Course this semester. Your opinion is very important to us, and your answers will be completely confidential. This survey will only take a couple of minutes of your time.

6. Did you participate in Spring Early Registration last Fall?                    **Y**                    **N**
7. Did you officially withdraw from class right after you decided to withdraw, or did you stop attending and officially withdrew later? **ASAP**                    **Later**  
**If later,**  
2b. How long was it between the time you stopped attending class and the time you officially withdrew?
8. Following are some reasons why students may withdraw from a class. Please indicate whether each reason was a Major Reason, a Minor Reason or Not a Reason for your dropping Course .
- a. Realized I did not have the background the course required
  - b. Did not like the location of the class
  - c. Course was too difficult for me
  - d. Registered for a course to save a seat for a friend with a later appointment
  - e. Was doing poorly in the class
  - f. I missed too many days
  - g. Realized after classes started that I didn't need the course
  - h. Did not like the instructor
  - i. Did not know my work schedule when I registered
  - j. Fell behind in class assignments
  - k. My instructor advised me to withdraw
  - l. Thought the class was boring
  - m. Did not have time for the class, due to work
  - n. Registered for extra courses so I could withdraw from one
- if Major or Minor Reason,**  
How did you decide which course to withdraw from?
4. Was there any other reason you withdrew from Course ?

5. For the following potential policy changes, please indicate whether such a policy would make you more likely to drop a course, less likely, or would not change the likelihood of your withdrawing from a course.
- a. Charging you additional tuition for more than 12 hours
  - b. Charging you a \$50 withdrawal fee per course
  - c. Requiring you to discuss the withdrawal with a counselor before it is approved
  - d. Putting a W and whatever grade was earned at the time of withdrawal on your transcript
  - e. Losing all Southeastern scholarships if you have more than 5 withdrawals during your academic career
  - f. Allowing you to get only a Freshmen hang tag if you have more than 2 withdrawals within two semesters

These are all the questions I have. Thank you for your time. If you have any questions regarding this survey, please contact Dr. Michelle Hall in the Office of Institutional Research at (985) 549-2077.