

ABSTRACT

Success for 4-year universities is often measured by graduation and retention rates; however, gaps exist in understanding non-returning students at private institutions. Recent research is helping to build the lexicon of drop-outs, stop-outs, opt-outs, and transfer-outs to inform strategic retention initiatives. Using an action research method, we characterized 1,091 students into designated subclasses and utilized exit interviews, advising notes, and university surveys to theme their departure intentions. Findings reveal transfer-outs to be the largest subclass, with departure reasons being summarized within themes of university experience and fit, health, academic, and financial. Recommendations are made for university administrators and retention offices related to exit survey questions, broadening success metrics, and to focus on specific student characteristic groups.

Keywords: retention, student success, action research, qualitative

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview:

International and first-generation students tend to experience lower levels of retention than domestic and non-first-generation students.

(Haverila et al., 2020; Soria & Stebleton, 2012)

Namely, financial stress, self-reported student loan debt, and sense of belonging represent useful predictors of student retention.

(Britt et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2019)

Gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status interact to affect student retention rates.

(Keels, 2013)

Retention Efforts:

"While increased access to higher education has contributed to social and economic benefits for historically underrepresented groups, it has also shed light on the issue of student retention and success for these same populations. Thus, it remains important for higher education leaders to differentiate their retention efforts to ensure a campus ready for student development."

(Thomas, 2016)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

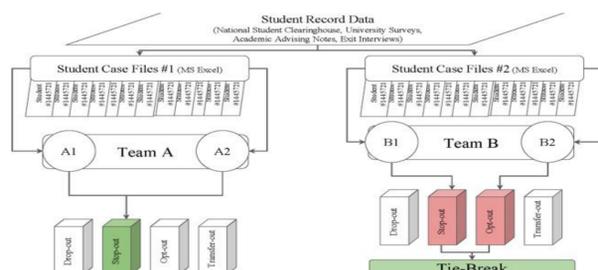
Opt-out	Drop-out
Definition: students who leave the institution having accomplished non-degree-seeking objectives	Definition: students who leave the institution permanently and do not reenroll toward degree-seeking objectives
Characteristics: non-degree-seeking, avocational (i.e., college is hobby to main vocation); attend to earn certificates or some form of knowledge	Characteristics: no plans to return; do not transfer to another HEI, usually motivated by financial reasons, family problems, or academic difficulties; tend to be older than typical students
Stop-out	Transfer-out
Definition: students who leave the institution temporarily with plans to reenroll towards degree-seeking objectives	Definition: students who leave the institution permanently by transferring to another HEI toward degree-seeking objectives
Characteristics: do not complete degree within the normal time schedule; health issues; financial reasons	Characteristics: status-driven; accessibility to different programs or program availability-driven; financial reasons

PURPOSE & RELEVANCE

Given the lack of research available on retention at private institutions (Hermanowicz, 2006) and the need to further understand non-returning students, we conducted this study with three purposes: (1) classify non-returning students using Hoyt's and Winn's (2004) framework; (2) summarize the departing intentions of non-returning students, and (3) compare the number of non-returning students falling into each subclass based on student characteristics

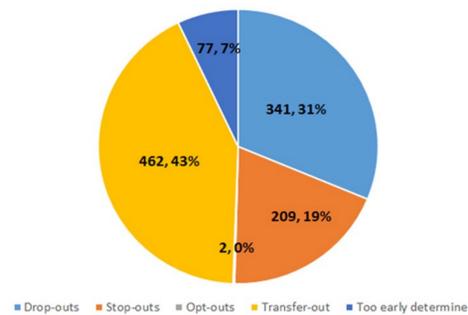
METHODS

- Action-based research design : process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action (Sagor, 2000; Melrose, 2001)
- Purposive sampling method: population is identifiable to the researchers (Patton, 1990) ND IN roster method (Marsden, 1990)
- Population & sample: Fall 2017 through spring 2021 WITH A TOTAL OF 1,091 non-returning students identified WHERE 69 students withdrew for medical or were dismissed for academic/conduct reasons were excluded



FINDINGS & RESULTS

CLASSIFYING NON-RETURNING STUDENTS INTO 5 SUBCATEGORIES:



Four Themes of Initial Departure Intentions:



- "elitist and judgmental attitudes of my fellow students made me realize that [research site] was not right for me."
- "The entire social life of the school is dominated by Greek life"
- "for my degree and situation there is another that is a better fit."
- "school officials do not respond back to emails with alarming issues."
- "The 20-minute walks to class made finding the motivation to attend [class] difficult."
- "my style of play . . . [is] not a good fit for the program."
- "I intended to leave [the research site] after 1 year."



- Cost of Attendance: "drowned by the cost of attendance."
- Financial Aid: "the financial aid decreases every time an outside scholarship has been earned."

- "for someone with social anxiety . . . living on campus isn't easy."
- "[live] closer to home . . . God forbid anything happen to my family."
- "I feel unsafe with the growing number of COVID-19 cases on campus."

- "I felt unchallenged or bored in many of my classes."
- "I feasibly could not graduate in four years with my mechanical engineering degree with the horrid breadth/[curriculum] requirements."
- "You guys are wrong for not accepting most (if not all) community college credit hours."

Groups to exhibit greater than expected representation within the non-returning population included:

- non-resident aliens ($p < 0.001$),
- Pell grant recipients ($p < 0.001$),
- transfer students ($p < 0.001$), and
- first-generation students ($p = 0.035$).

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS



Modifications to exit survey:

Universities should ensure that questions about university fit & experience are present since most transfer outs listed perceived fit as primary reasoning for departure. Additionally, a classification question to identify opt-outs in the survey should be beneficial. Finally, identifying all the sub-classifications with a multiple choice option would be helpful to understand each sub-class demographic population.

Outreach during first unenrolled semester:

Implement protocols to outreach to unenrolled students without leave documentation after one term of unenrollment.

Collect intention information to determine possible departure risks and a status (transfer out, drop-out, stop out, or opt out) in the event they do not return.



Connect institutional data sources:

For this study, the research team drew from multiple sources of information. In the future, the university should integrate all sources of departure information to create a richer data source which would enable us to help students. Currently, there are two pre-departure tools (academic advising notes, faculty and staff survey). One of these tools should be removed to focus reporting to a more centralized way.



Establish feedback loop for student retention:

- The university should create protocol with a feedback loop structure with a predetermined timeline to review students surveys and other sources of departure information.
- Only around 10% of student records contained intention-focused data sources. This raised the question: Do current business practices collect enough information from nonreturning students to shape student retention efforts at SMU?



Diversity the institutional definition of success.:

There is an assumption that graduation with a 4-year degree is the sole avenue to achieve success. This is problematic. If a student opts out of college and starts a **successful business or goes to the military** is this failure on behalf of the institution if it supported such endeavors with programs and infrastructure? How are these alternative definitions of success being captured for reporting purposes?

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