



Assessment Bulletin

Volume 4, Number 2
February 2001

Office of
Academic Planning
and Assessment

Non-Returning First-Year Students: Why They Leave and Where They Go

SUMMARY The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, in cooperation with Student Affairs, Research, Information and Systems (SARIS), surveyed students who entered UMass Amherst in Fall 1997 but who voluntarily left after their first year. Students' reasons for leaving are diverse, but the most often mentioned factors include financial constraints, home/family issues, and concerns related to the academic climate on campus. Most students who leave UMass transfer to another institution. These institutions represent the full range of institutional types, from community colleges to other Research I universities. Students' own academic performance in college also plays a significant role in shaping their reasons for leaving and their post-UMass plans.

A Question of Retention

An institution's rate of retention (the proportion of students who remain enrolled) is a closely watched indicator of institutional success. Low retention reflects poorly on an institution's ability to meet the needs of its students, disrupts the efficient allocation of resources, and can affect the public's perception of its effectiveness.

In September 1997, 3,736 first-time, first-year students began their college careers at UMass Amherst. One year later, 21% (n=783) of these students did not return for their second year. Of those who did not return, more than one-third (39%) had run into academic difficulty serious enough to lead to dismissal and almost two-thirds (61%) had withdrawn voluntarily from the University.

Because retention is such an important issue, the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) decided to explore the reasons behind these students' decisions to leave through a telephone survey conducted by Student Affairs Research, Information, and Systems (SARIS). In November 1998, SARIS surveyed first-time, first-year students who entered UMass in the fall of 1997 but decided not to return for their second year. Only those students who left voluntarily were contacted; students who were academically dismissed or required to withdraw for other reasons were not included in the sample.

The Survey Sample

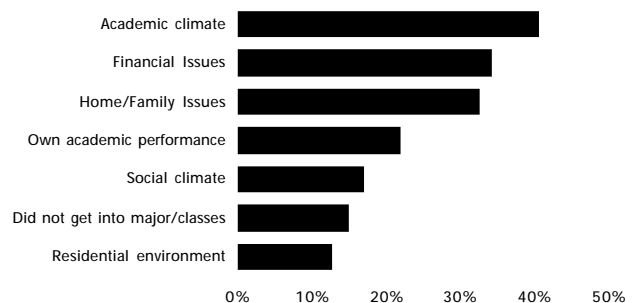
Surveys of individuals who have left an institution are notoriously difficult to conduct because these former students are often quite difficult to reach. Nonetheless, SARIS was able to contact 45% (n=210) of the eligible sample (n=467). Eighty-nine percent (n=187) of those individuals reached agreed to participate. While not all voluntary leavers were contacted, the respondent sample

appears to be fairly representative of the full population of leavers. Hispanic students are over-represented in the respondent population and African Americans and Asian Americans are under-represented. However, on other demographic characteristics (gender, residency status, academic major) respondents and the full population of leavers are similar. There are also no significant differences on indicators of academic preparation and performance (high school and college GPA, SAT scores).

Why Do Students Choose to Leave?

We approached the study of students' reasons for leaving by asking them to rate each of a series of 25 factors as either a major reason, a minor reason or not a reason contributing to their decision to leave. These factors reflect a range of issues identified in the retention literature as relevant to students' decision to leave. For ease of presentation, we used factor analyses to cluster these reasons into a smaller set of over-arching concepts (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Major Reasons for Leaving



The top three categories reflect three distinct areas of concern: academic climate (reflecting primarily dissatisfaction with the university's size but also including inadequate advising, poor quality teaching, unapproachable faculty, courses not challenging, and dissatisfaction with academic reputation), financial problems (no financial assistance, no money, too expensive and inadequate financial aid), and home/family issues (family responsibilities and wanting to be closer to home).

What Do They Do After They Leave?

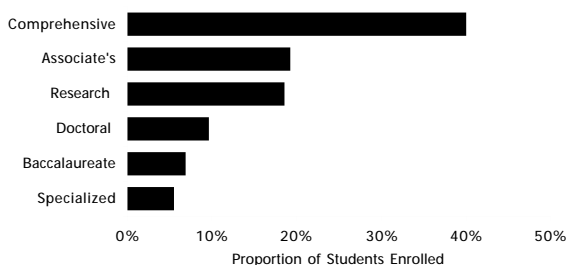
We were also interested in **where** students go once they leave. As **Table 1** indicates, most of the students who left UMass enrolled immediately in another institution.

Table 1: Current Status of Non-Returning Students

	% of Respondents	N
Enrolled elsewhere	77.5	145
Not enrolled, working FT or PT	20.3	38
Neither enrolled or working	2.1	4
Total	100%	187

Of those who did enroll at another institution, about half (51%) chose to stay in Massachusetts and half (49%) enrolled out-of-state. In this sample, six institutions (five of them public) had the largest number of transfers: UMass Boston, Worcester State College, Fitchburg State College, Salem State College, Stonehill College and UMass Lowell. **Figure 2** shows the types of institutions in which students enrolled.

Figure 2: New Schools by Carnegie Classification

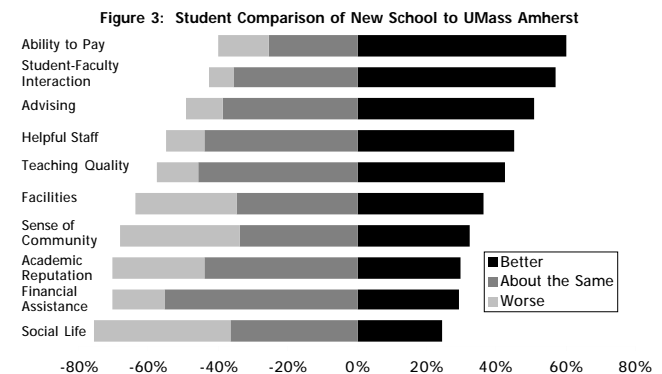


Most students chose to attend a Master's institution. Approximately 20% went on to attend another Research institution.

How Does UMass Amherst Compare to Students' New Institutions?

Given that most students who do not return to UMass transfer to another college or university, we were curious to know how their new school compared with UMass Amherst. Respondents were asked whether their current institution was better, about the same, or worse than UMass, along ten dimensions reflecting academic, financial and social climate characteristics of the institutions.

Figure 3 illustrates these comparisons. One might expect that the new institution would rate more highly than UMass. Indeed, this is the case in three areas -- affordability, student-faculty interaction, and advising -- where the majority (50% or more) indicated that their new institution is better.



In other cases, students' preferences for their new institution were less clear. For example, while about 40% of the respondents indicated that their new institution is better than UMass in terms of helpfulness of staff and quality of teaching, equal proportions said the two institutions are about the same.

With respect to other factors, students' ratings were even more mixed. Students were fairly equally divided in their ratings of UMass and their new institution in terms of quality of facilities, sense of community, and the institution's academic reputation. With respect to financial assistance, most students indicated that the two institutions are about the same (note that students make a distinction between being able to pay the cost of tuition and the amount of financial assistance made available to them). Finally, the social life was clearly seen as better at UMass than at the new institution.

First-Semester Academic Performance: Its Relationship with Attrition

Students' academic performance during their first year of college can have a significant effect on their chances of returning for their second year. In multivariate analyses we have conducted to predict students' retention, first-semester grade point average (GPA) is consistently the strongest predictor. For this reason, we wanted to explore the relationship between academic performance (as reflected by one-year cumulative GPA) and the students' responses.

Table 2 shows that there is a fairly even distribution of cumulative college GPA at exit across the group of non-returning students who responded to the survey. Note how even among this group of students who left voluntarily, almost a third were in serious academic jeopardy, achieving a college GPA of 2.0 or less.

Table 2: Cumulative GPA at Exit

Cumulative GPA	% of Respondents	N
< 2.0	31.6	59
2.0 - 3.0	31.6	59
> 3.0	36.9	69
Total	100%	187

GPA and Reasons for Leaving

Students at these different levels of academic performance tend to identify different reasons for leaving. **Table 3** shows the top three reasons for each group, with the most often-mentioned reason for each in bold.

Table 3: Top Three Reasons for Leaving by GPA

Cumulative GPA	Own Academic Performance	Financial Issues	Academic Climate	Home/Family Issues
< 2.0	45.8%	35.6%	35.6%	35.6%
2.0 - 3.0		44.1%	39.0%	32.2%
> 3.0		24.6%	46.4%	30.4%

Respondents in the lowest GPA category were most likely to identify factors related to their own academic performance (i.e., lack of effort, poor study skills) as major reasons for leaving. Students in the middle category (with a GPA greater than 2.0 but less than 3.0) were most likely to indicate that financial factors contributed to their decision to leave. Finally, respondents with a GPA greater

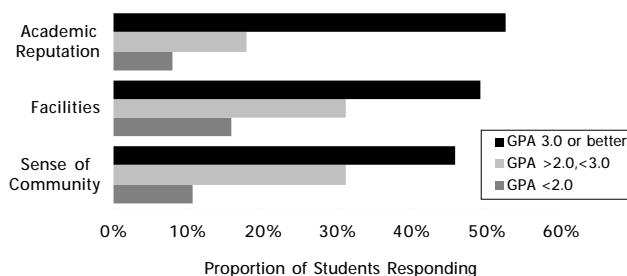
than 3.0 were most likely to report that factors related to unsatisfactory academic climate influenced their withdrawal.

GPA and Students' Plans After UMass

GPA is also related to students' plans after they leave UMass, particularly for students in the lowest GPA category. These students are less likely to be enrolled elsewhere. If they are enrolled in college, they are more likely to be enrolled at a community college. On the other hand, students with the highest GPAs are much more likely to attend other Research institutions.

Figure 3 on page 2 shows the comparison of UMass to students' new institutions across a number of dimensions. For some of these variables, perceptions favored UMass or the new institution fairly clearly. In a few cases, however, responses were scattered, with no clear pattern. As seen in **Figure 4** below, a clear pattern does emerge, however, when one takes respondents' GPA into account.

Figure 4: Percent Rating New School Better by GPA



The three factors with the most "mixed" results for the sample as a whole -- academic reputation, facilities, and sense of community -- were also the only three factors for which responses differed significantly by GPA. In all three cases, students with the highest GPAs were more likely to rate their new institutions as better than UMass.

Discussion

Perhaps the clearest message emerging from this study is that there is no single explanation for student attrition. Students' reasons for leaving are varied, as are the choices they make once they leave and their comparison of their new institutions with UMass. Having said that, a few themes are worth highlighting. First, three types of reasons for leaving seem particularly salient: unsatisfactory academic experience, financial problems and con-

straints, and the press of home and family. These issues are common in the retention literature and familiar to those who work closely with students on this campus. The consistency of the results confirms the value of current institutional efforts to develop small learning communities, contain college costs, and improve advising support.

Second, students who leave UMass and transfer to another institution do not have universally negative judgments of UMass Amherst. While they generally view their new institution as better than UMass in affordability and academic support and interaction, they make fewer distinctions between the two institutions on a number of other critical institutional factors, including the quality of teaching, the helpfulness of staff, and financial assistance.

Third, these results confirm and further illustrate the significant and substantial role that academic performance plays in shaping students' reasons for leaving -- even among those who leave the University voluntarily. When we look at students' responses by their cumulative GPA, at least two distinct populations of leavers emerge. First, students who do particularly poorly in their first year often leave because they are not prepared to do college-level work. These students tend to either take a break from

college or enroll at a community college. The other group of students was doing well academically and appears to have left to attend more prestigious institutions or institutions that they believe have higher quality academic offerings. Clearly, addressing the needs of these two groups of students requires very different strategies. For the low performers, discovering successful academic strategies early in their college careers is crucial. For the latter group, academic experiences that directly address their interest in a challenging and high-quality academic experience are critical.

As these results make clear, answering the retention riddle is a complex task. No one strategy will work to address the needs of all students. Instead, it requires a multi-pronged approach developed from a thorough understanding of the diversity in the student population and the variety of issues that cause them to leave UMass.

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The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) provides service to the campus community in evaluating student learning and program effectiveness. OAPA can assist departments and individual faculty members in several areas:

- **Developing evaluation plans** for new programs, grant proposals, and externally and internally funded projects.
- **Exploring and articulating** student learning outcomes appropriate to a course or program.
- **Finding useful ways** of assessing student success in achieving program goals.
- **Developing strategies** for undertaking systematic reviews of program effectiveness for quality improvement, accreditation and other purposes.

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