

Non-Returning First Year Students: Stability and Change in Reasons for Leaving

Summary

Over three administrations (1998, 2004, 2006) of a non-returning student survey, several patterns emerge:

- The percentage of students who have voluntarily left UMass Amherst after their first year has remained fairly consistent, and a large majority of these students were enrolled at another school by the time they were contacted.
- While the levels of performance (GPAs) of the non-returning student populations for 1997 and 2003 were evenly distributed across GPA ranges, in 2005 the percentage of low-achieving students (GPAs \leq 2.00) decreased to only 20%.
- For all three surveys, lack of personal attention is the most frequently identified reason for leaving UMass; this reason has become even more prominent in the most recent survey, including among high-achieving students.

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Introduction

The University of Massachusetts Amherst has a long-standing interest in the number of students who enroll as first-year students and do not return for their second year. The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) tracks retention rates on a regular basis (see http://www.umass.edu/oapa/publications/factsheets/retention/FS_ret_01_f06.pdf). In addition, the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA), in collaboration with the Student Assessment, Research, and Evaluation Office (SAREO), conducts a phone survey of non-returning students every few years to track long-term changes and consistencies in students' reasons for leaving.

In this report, we focus on results for three administrations of this non-returned survey: 1998, 2004, and 2006. The sample for this survey is all students who enrolled as freshmen and voluntarily left UMass before their second year. A primary focus of the survey is students' reasons for choosing to leave UMass. While the data for each year offers "snapshots" for that cohort, having results from three separate cohorts, spanning an eight year period, makes it possible to identify trends in students' reasons for leaving.

Survey Population

As Table 1 shows, the 1st year student population has increased in size and improved in academic preparation over the three cohorts. And, not surprising given this trend, the proportion of first-year students required to leave for academic reasons has decreased. In contrast, the percent of voluntary leavers has stayed fairly consistent (between 12% and 13%).

For each survey administration, the survey population was all non-returning students who voluntarily withdrew before their

second year. These former students are obviously more difficult to reach than students who are still enrolled. For the first two administrations of the survey, we were able to achieve a 40% response rate; however, in the most recent administration the response rate dropped to 27%, possibly because it was administered somewhat later than previous years (note the higher proportion of "unable to contact" in the 2005 Cohort in Table 2). Still, for all years, there have been no significant differences

Table 1: 1997, 2003 and 2005 Cohort Comparisons: Academic Preparation and Retention Statistics

	2005	2003	1997
Cohort Size	4427	4077	3737
Math SAT (Mean)	579	576	557
Verbal SAT (Mean)	564	561	551
HS GPA (Weighted)	3.38	3.28	3.09
% Suspended	4.2%	5.9%	8.2%
% Voluntarily Withdrawn	13.2%	11.8%	12.8%

Table 2: Final Disposition of the One-Year Non-Returner Samples

	2005 Cohort Survey		2003 Cohort Survey		1997 Cohort Survey	
	n	% of total	n	% of total	n	% of total
In and cooperated	146	27.2	183	40.4	187	40.0
In, but would not cooperate	25	4.7	45	9.9	23	4.9
Unable to contact	365	68.1	225	49.7	257	55.0
Total	536	100.0	453	100.0	467	100.0

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between survey respondents and non-respondents by gender, race/ethnicity, or academic achievement (measured in terms of their cumulative UMass GPA and their high school GPA).

Looking within the respondent groups, the profile of the students is similar from year to year – with similar percentages of men/women, ALANA/non-ALANA, in-state/out of state, and declared/undeclared (major) students across all three years (Table 3). Respondents have also been similar in terms of academic preparation in the last two administrations; in the first administration the academic profile was lower, reflecting the lower profile in the enrolling population as a whole (Table 4). For all three surveys, over three-quarters of survey respondents were already enrolled in another institution of higher education when they were contacted (Table 5).

	2005 Cohort (n = 146)	2003 Cohort (n = 177)	1997 Cohort (n = 187)
Female	55.5%	54.8%	58.8%
ALANA	15.8%	13.1%	18.1%
Instate	72.6%	73.5%	65.2%
Undeclared Major	41.1%	34.5%	41.2%

* Male, non-ALANA, out of state and declared major students constitute the remainder (to 100%) of each percentage.

	2005 Cohort (n = 146)	2003 Cohort (n = 177)	1997 Cohort (n = 187)
High School GPA	3.30	3.27	3.09
Math SAT	575	573	549
Verbal SAT	565	566	551

	2005 Cohort (n = 146)	2003 Cohort (n = 176)	1997 Cohort (n = 187)
Enrolled at another school	84.9%	79.0%	77.5%
Not enrolled	15.1%	21.0%	22.5%

Why do students choose to leave? Patterns across time

In this survey, we asked students to respond to a series of reasons for leaving, by indicating whether each was a “Major Reason”, “Minor Reason”, or Not a Reason” for their leaving (Appendix A). These 26 “fixed choice” reasons were drawn from the extensive retention literature and reflect a range of individual and institutional factors that can affect student persistence. They also reflect a smaller set of broad themes (confirmed through

statistical analyses): personal attention, personal constraints, social life, cost, student effort, quality, access, and climate.

Looking first at the overall frequency of each reason being mentioned, and for ease of interpretation focusing on the most recent cohort, half of the respondents note that lack of personal attention contributed to their decision to leave (and a quarter indicate it was a major reason). One-third indicate reasons related to their own personal constraints or concerns, and about 30% mention cost and quality of social life. About a quarter of students mention access to classes or major, their own effort, or reputational and instructional quality. The number of students mentioning climate is substantially lower (4%).

The benefit of having responses over time emerges particularly in the “lack of personal attention” theme. While this category has always been the most frequently identified theme, the overall proportion of students identifying it as a reason has increased over time (i.e., the total moves from 43% in 1997 to 50% in 2005). When we look at the individual items within that cluster, it becomes clear that the increase is due particularly to two items: “Too little contact with faculty” and “Academic advising was inadequate”.

There are other trends to note. Dissatisfaction with social life as a reason for leaving has decreased in importance between 2003 and 2005. The percent of students indicating that cost was a reason for leaving decreased between the 1997 and 2003 cohorts of respondents, and has remained the same between 2003 and 2005. However, this may be due to a larger proportion of out-of-state students in the 1997 cohort and their particular concerns about the price of out-of-state tuition. Overall, though, a greater number of reasons for leaving have been chosen as major or minor reasons by individuals in the most recent administration.

Reasons for Leaving and College Academic Performance

As the institution works to identify strategies for improving retention, a key question is the extent to which students’ own academic performance is related to their reasons for leaving UMass Amherst. While some might assume that the majority of students who leave do so because of academic difficulty, the distribution of academic performance among those who leave voluntarily tells a different story. Across these three survey administrations, the non-returning student population is distributed across all three GPA ranges; in the most recent cohort, the percent of non-returning students in the lowest GPA range (≤ 2.00) actually decreased to only one-fifth of the population (Table 6).

Table 6: Cumulative GPA of Non-returning students

	2005 Cohort (n = 500)	2003 Cohort (n = 476)	1997 Cohort (n = 475)
≤ 2.00	20.0%	29.4%	31.6%
2.01 – 3.00	40.6%	32.4%	34.1%
3.01 or higher	39.4%	38.2%	34.3%

To explore whether students' reasons for leaving vary by their college-level performance, we look at the importance of each cluster of reasons by college GPA (see Table 7).

In some cases, the patterns of difference in reasons for leaving, between students with varying GPAs, are immediately understandable, as in the higher percentage of students with low GPAs (2.00 or below) attributing their departure to problems with their own effort, and the higher percentage of students with high GPAs (over 3.00) identifying issues of academic quality as important to them. Students with higher GPAs are also more likely to attribute their decision to leave UMass to dissatisfaction with their social life. Again, all of these patterns are consistent between the three instances of survey administration.

In looking at changes over time, the "Personal Attention" theme again shows interesting results. In previous survey administrations, the importance of lack of personal attention as reasons for leaving was slightly to substantially higher for those students with the lowest GPA. However, in the most recent survey administration, this theme is equally present for students from all academic performance levels. There has also been change in the importance of the quality of social life, with the reason becoming more important to students in the top two performance categories, and variable over time for those students performing least well.

Implications for Practice

As the retention data shows, for the three cohorts under analysis, the proportion of students who voluntarily leave has remained rather stable at 12-13% of entering students, and our overall one year retention rate has improved somewhat to 82.6%. This one year retention rate places us slightly below our public research university peers (with average retention rates of 87.3%). In addition, comparing students' reasons for leaving over time makes it possible to see what reasons for leaving are fairly consistent. For many of the core themes, the proportion of students is similar across years – and it might be expected that these reasons will always affect some proportion of the student body.

There is perhaps particular reason for concern when we see increased mention of certain reasons over time. For example, lack of personal attention has become more of a problem for all students, and in the most recent survey administration the proportion of high achieving students mentioning this as a reason matched that for students at the lowest achievement level (52%). The relatively dramatic change, particularly between the two most recent cohorts (where survey items were identical) raises questions about what has changed on campus. Is it students' expectations for contact with faculty, quality advising, and smaller classes even in a large University? Or, has the student experience become increasingly impersonal, and as a result higher proportions of students identify it as a reason to leave? It's important to note that the overall proportion of voluntary leavers has not changed – but the issue of personal attention may become a growing problem not only in retaining students, but in recruiting them in the first place.

**Table 7: Percent Rating Each Set of Reasons at Highest Level*:
By College GPA at Last Semester Enrolled**

	2005 Cohort			2003 Cohort			1997 Cohort		
	≤ 2.00	2.01 to 3.00	> 3.00	≤ 2.00	2.01 to 3.00	> 3.00	≤ 2.00	2.01 to 3.00	> 3.00
Personal attention	52%	50%	52%	56%	32%	42%	31%	21%	28%
Personal Constraints	41%	23%	37%	44%	24%	24%	39%	24%	24%
Social Life	15%	28%	38%	26%	18%	29%	5%	10%	12%
Cost	10%	14%	20%	7%	14%	17%	19%	24%	16%
Student Effort	38%	20%	9%	46%	23%	3%	37%	15%	4%
Quality	17%	18%	28%	18%	18%	34%	10%	9%	23%
Access	3%	9%	9%	4%	5%	8%	3%	7%	7%
Climate	0%	3%	2%	2%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%

**Those individuals who indicated at least three items in cluster as a minor reason or one item as minor and one as major.
The top three categories for each group are highlighted.*

**Appendix A: Comparison of 1997, 2003, and 2005 Cohort Responses
on Reasons for Leaving: Survey Wording Changes Indicated
(Listed in descending order by total % for Fall 2005 Cohort)**

	Fall 2005 Cohort		Fall 2003 Cohort		Fall 1997 Cohort	
	Major Reason	Total ^a	Major Reason	Total	Major Reason	Total
Personal Attention (Average % for all items)	24%	50%	21%	44%	16%	43%
Treated like a number, not a person	29%	57%	32%	53%	-	-
Classes were too big	24%	49%	23%	47%	-	-
Too little contact with faculty ^b	21%	51%	18%	40%	8%	29%
Academic advising was inadequate	21%	44%	14%	35%	13%	44%
Wanted a smaller school	-	-	-	-	28%	56%
Personal Constraints (Average % for all items)	15%	33%	17%	33%	15%	30%
Wanted to be closer to home	29%	56%	33%	53%	27%	51%
Family responsibilities	11%	32%	12%	28%	12%	24%
Personal illness/psychological problems	10%	19%	14%	26%	13%	24%
Had problems with roommates	9%	25%	11%	25%	6%	20%
Cost (Average % for all items)	14%	30%	14%	30%	20%	40%
UMass too expensive	16%	31%	19%	34%	20%	40%
UMass not a good enough value for the money	12%	29%	9%	27%	-	-
Social Life (Average % for all items)	12%	29%	15%	34%	9%	29%
Didn't like residence hall life	16%	41%	19%	38%	-	-
Didn't fit in at UMass	18%	34%	14%	35%	9%	28%
Dissatisfied with the social life ^c	10%	27%	12%	30%	10%	30%
Not enough to do on weekends	4%	12%	-	-	-	-
Access (Average % for all items)	10%	25%	7%	20%	8%	21%
Could not get into classes	7%	25%	5%	21%	9%	27%
Could not get into major ^d	13%	25%	10%	19%	8%	14%
Student Effort (Average % for all items)	6%	24%	9%	24%	10%	27%
Didn't put in enough effort	10%	30%	13%	34%	14%	32%
Had poor study skills	5%	26%	10%	23%	11%	31%
Spent too much time partying ^e	9%	22%	11%	21%	5%	19%
Academically, too difficult	1%	17%	1%	19%	-	-
Quality (Average % for all items)	6%	23%	6%	22%	8%	26%
Dissatisfied with instructor quality ^f	10%	34%	7%	28%	10%	32%
Dissatisfied with academic reputation	6%	29%	6%	28%	5%	24%
Courses were not challenging	8%	26%	7%	24%	7%	24%
Dissatisfied with classrooms/labs	3%	15%	6%	18%	-	-
Dissatisfied with athletic/rec facilities	2%	10%	4%	12%	-	-
Climate (Average % for all items)	2%	4%	1%	6%	3%	6%
Experienced harassment	2%	4%	1%	7%	1%	6%
Felt racial/ethnic tension	2%	4%	2%	5%	5%	6%

^a "Total" refers to sum percent of students indicating that reason was either "major" or "minor".

^b 1997 wording difference: Faculty unapproachable

^c 1997 wording difference: Quality of social life

^d 1997 wording difference: Could not get into major of choice

^e 1997 wording difference: Trouble managing your social life

^f 1997 wording difference: Dissatisfied with quality of teaching