

Statistics Don't Lie, But...

Place The Blame For College Dropouts Where It Belongs

An Analysis by Patricia
Smith-Deering
Phoenix Managing Editor

Results of a survey listing "Reasons Why Students Do Not Return To Universities and Colleges" have recently come to light and the list is making its way through some administrative channels and, at least, one area historically-Black university.

The reasons are quite revealing about institutions of higher learning, students and their attitudes. The danger with the survey data, however, is how people manipulate the results for problem-solving a decision-making. There's an old expression: "Figures don't like, but liars know how to figure." The same can be said about survey results - statistical data that can be used to say any number of things, particularly when top administrators are intent on clouding issues and their roles in them. First, let's look at the organization of this particular survey's results.

The reasons for students not returning are divided into five categories: academic, climate (environmental), financial, personal, and physical facilities. There is a total of 91 reasons listed numerically, giving an initial appearance of a continuing, descending order of importance, regardless of category (i.e., academic: #1-28, climate #29-46, financial #47-60, personal: #61-86, and physical facilities #87-91.) Before any analysis can be done and the usual finger-pointing and fault-finding can take place, each category must be numbered from one to whatever (rank-ordered), analyzed separately first, then compared in terms of relative importance to and impact on all the other categories.

With that done, some meaningful, preliminary analysis is readily possible. This can be done, despite lack of specific knowledge of the sex, ethnicity/race, and previous academic background of those surveyed or the ratio of those surveyed and those responding versus the total student populations of the universities. Further analyses would consider these aspects, as well as data adjustments for multiple reasons given by a single respondent, if any.

• **Academic:** 31% (28) of the 91 reasons cite academic problems as the causes for not returning to a university or college. Topping the

list is "poor grades." The rest of the top 10 are:

2. Did not have the right courses.
3. Courses were too difficult.
4. Courses were too easy.
5. Instruction was poor.
6. Did not receive proper academic advising.

7. Did not study properly.
8. Was placed on academic probation.
9. Did not have my academic major.
10. Too much cheating in class.

Reason #28, at the bottom of the category, is: "Could not understand the accent of many instructors."

• **Climate (Environmental):** 20% (18) of the 91 reasons cite the campus environment as the cause for not returning. University size [too small #1 (#29 on the list), too large #2 (#30 on the list)] heads this category. The eight remaining reasons in the top ten are:

3. (31.) Treated like a child.
4. (32.) Office employees were not too friendly.
5. (33.) Would prefer a college with a different racial makeup.
6. (34.) Nothing to do when not in class.
7. (35.) So many young students felt out of place.
8. (36.) Lack of dating/social opportunities.
9. (37.) Prefer a university with different ratio of men to women (or women to men).
10. (38.) The activities on-campus conflict with my religious/personal beliefs.

Bringing up the rear as reason #18 in this category (#46 on the list) is a classic: "There's no place to park and will not walk."

• **Financial:** 15% (14) of the 91 reasons cite a lack of or problems with financial resources. Topping this category are: Applied for financial aid but did not receive it. #1 (#47 on the list), and "College costs too much #2 (#48 on the list). Loss of job (student's, mother's, father's) was at the bottom of this category #14 (#60 on the list.).

• **Personal:** 29% (26) of the 91 reasons cite a variety of personal reasons, ranging from #1 (#61 on the list) in this category - "Was not interested in college" - to #26 (#86 on the list): "Student is deceased." The other reasons in the top 10 of

this category are:

2. (62.) Decided to transfer to another university.
3. (63.) Got married.
4. (64.) Became pregnant.
5. (65.) Want to be nearer home.
6. (66.) Had family responsibilities.

7. (67.) Felt racial/ethnic tension.
8. (68.) Was not ready for college.
9. (69.) Did not feel comfortable in an academic setting.
10. (70.) Had a personal illness.

• **Physical Facilities:** 5% (5) of the 91 reasons cite problems with housing, both on- and off- campus. They are:

1. (87.) Could not locate housing.
2. (88.) Facilities on-campus were totally inadequate.
3. (89.) Too many roaches in residence hall.
4. (90.) Could not move on-campus.
5. (91.) My roommate in off-campus housing moved out. Could not afford rental.

One of the problems with a cursory analysis of data is the conclusion-jumping that takes place, particularly when top administration wants to place blame, not find the cause, for issues like low student enrollment and/or retention. After all, that affects alumni giving and fundraising efforts. Take, as an example, an administrative staff meeting held by a department administrator at an area university to discuss the survey findings. Staff members were accused of being a significant cause of the students' not returning to the campus because "office employees were not too friendly." On the survey list, this reason is #32 out of 91 or #4 out of 18 reasons under the **Climate (Environment)** category. If that category is correctly rank-ordered by its percentage (20%) among the five used in the survey, climate ranks #2, well behind **Academic (31%)** and **Personal (20%)** categories of reasons for students not returning.

Why, then, would a good administrator consider it effective people management to browbeat his other employees, placing the cause for low enrollment specifically at the feet of those who minister to

students' needs? Who directly decides which students are qualified - academically, financially, and otherwise - to enter and remain at an institution of higher learning? Certainly not those in administrative support positions.]

It is surely comforting for students to meet a friendly face when they encounter those who must register them, help them through the bureaucratic maze of financial aid forms and procedures, safeguard their passage across an increasingly-violent campus, or provide medical treatment laced with a little TLC. But, when you look at the primary reasons - academic and personal - for students not returning to universities, the demeanor of the administrative staff, while professionally important, is tangential to the real problems reflected in the survey.

These boil down to two: 1.) instructors, student advisors, and/or courses, selected by university administrators, and 2.) students, selected by university administrators, and student attitudes. Placing the blame, disproportionately, on those who are doing the day-to-day work is the typical "red herring" or "smoke screen." If, in fact, there is a single employee or employee group powerful or obnoxious enough to cause an exodus of students intent on serious academic pursuits, the finger still points to the administrators who are responsible for hiring, firing, and maintaining morale. But, students encounter instructors, their advisors, their peers, and their own personal problems (or personal best) much more frequently.

University administration would do well to investigate the real needs to be addressed, if there are problems like dwindling enrollment. The survey can be a useful tool, but only if adequate analyses and problem-solving, decision-making techniques are employed, as opposed to inane data manipulation.

Editor's Note: During my 20-year career at AT&T, I developed and taught courses on data collection and techniques of data analysis to corporate executives, managers, and employees throughout the corporation, as well as designing and implementing a variety of data collection methodology.

A SURVEY ANALYSIS