

# Spring 2008 Survey of Non-returning Students

## Executive Summary

As Washington State University continues its emphasis on retaining its students, it is important to look at the students who leave the university. In this study, we attempted direct contact with the students after they left the university, to ask about their reasons for leaving and plans for the future in the hopes of obtaining information that could be used to inform retention efforts at the university.

The population of interest for this survey was all undergraduate students who were enrolled at the Pullman campus for the fall 2007 semester, but were not enrolled at any WSU campus for the spring 2008 semester with some exclusions (graduated, excused for academic or conduct issues). The Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at WSU, was contracted to administer this survey of non-returning students by means of a telephone survey. At the end of the calling period, a total of 389 surveys were completed. This number of completed surveys reflects a response rate of 56%. After factoring out the proportion of the population that was unreachable due to reasons such as unanswered calls and incorrect phone numbers, the study experienced a cooperation rate of 87%.

The table below depicts the demographic characteristics of the total non-returning student population and the portion for which a survey was completed. The survey sample closely reflected the population in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class.

| Demographic | Subcategory                      | Survey Respondents |     | Non-returning Student Population |     |
|-------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|-----|----------------------------------|-----|
|             |                                  | #                  | %   | #                                | %   |
| Gender      | Female                           | 156                | 40% | 371                              | 42% |
|             | Male                             | 231                | 60% | 519                              | 58% |
| Ethnicity   | Asian American/ Pacific Islander | 3                  | 1%  | 27                               | 3%  |
|             | African American                 | 34                 | 9%  | 75                               | 8%  |
|             | Caucasian                        | 304                | 79% | 645                              | 72% |
|             | Chicano(a)/ Latino(a)            | 14                 | 4%  | 44                               | 5%  |
|             | Native American                  | 3                  | 1%  | 8                                | 1%  |
|             | International                    | 5                  | 1%  | 23                               | 3%  |
|             | Ethnicity Not Reported           | 24                 | 6%  | 68                               | 8%  |
| Class       | Freshman                         | 149                | 39% | 305                              | 34% |
|             | Sophomore                        | 97                 | 25% | 198                              | 22% |
|             | Junior                           | 83                 | 21% | 185                              | 21% |
|             | Senior                           | 58                 | 15% | 202                              | 23% |

Note: While efforts were made at the outset of the survey administration to account for students who received a degree in the Fall 2007 term, some degree information was not available until after administration of the survey began. This table does not include these students for whom degree information was late-coming, and therefore does not match the totals discussed in the narrative on response rates. Specifically, 31 students were omitted from the population counts in the table, and two students were omitted from the respondent counts.

## Highlighted results

- A substantial proportion of the non-returning students said they entered WSU with the intent to earn a bachelor's degree (75%) or graduate degree (14%).
- 65% of the respondents were either already enrolled at another college or planned to do so in the future.
  - ✓ By far, the most commonly named schools were Washington community or technical colleges.
- 43% of the respondents planned to re-enroll at WSU in the future; 18% were undecided
- The conditions cited most-often as major reasons for the students leaving WSU were consistent with the results of the previous year's survey of non-returning students.
- The lack of a single reason being a major cause for leaving for even a quarter of the population, and the gradual decline in percentages for other reasons shows that there is no single circumstance that serves as a major cause for students leaving.
  - ✓ 24%, emotional, health, or family-related circumstance
  - ✓ 23%, desire to move to a new location
  - ✓ 20%, dissatisfaction with academic performance
  - ✓ 18%, desire to get away from college for a while
  - ✓ 15%, failure to receive enough financial support to help cover costs
- The circumstances cited most often as minor reasons for leaving WSU were some of the same ones cited as major reasons, with some additions. Circumstances not also covered as common major reasons included:
  - ✓ 20%, a desire to work instead of attending college
  - ✓ 19%, too little contact with faculty
  - ✓ 17%, unsatisfactory interactions with faculty
  - ✓ 17%, poor academic advising
- The circumstances cited least often as reasons for leaving indicated that WSU has done a decent job providing an environment that supports the students academically and socially
  - ✓ 5%, inadequate facilities
  - ✓ 7%, lack of challenging courses
  - ✓ 10%, inadequate support for social activities

- ✓ 10%, failure to get into desired major
- ✓ 11%, trouble finding employment
- ✓ 12%, difficulty making friends at WSU
- ✓ 13%, inadequate housing choices
- ✓ 13%, influence of parents or relatives
- Comparisons between responses for minority and Caucasian students suggested real differences between the two groups on two potential reasons for leaving WSU.
  - ✓ Dissatisfaction with academic performance
    - 32% minority respondents cited the circumstance
    - 46% Caucasian respondents cited this circumstance
  - ✓ Desire to move to a new location
    - 57% of the minority respondents
    - 40% of Caucasian
- Among respondents who were enrolled at a Washington community or technical college (WA CTC) at the time of the survey or planned to do so in the future, 28% cited dissatisfaction with academic performance as a major reason for leaving WSU
- 38% of the Washington four-year public university group left WSU because they failed to receive any financial help
- From the open-ended comments, a few patterns emerged
  - ✓ Dissatisfaction with academic advising was common among non-returning students.
  - ✓ A few of the parent respondents wished WSU offered more holistic advising and guidance for their children in adjusting to college and navigating the unfamiliar, bureaucratic environment.
  - ✓ Somewhat related, another theme was a feeling that the university was impersonal and unresponsive. There was a feeling among some respondents that the university was driven by bottom-line concerns rather than the well being and development of its students.