SPRING 2008 SURVEY OF NON-RETURNING STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

As Washington State University continues its emphasis on retaining its students, it is important to look at the students who leave the university. One way to do this is to look at student data to see if there are patterns in characteristics such as grades, hometown, or field of study among students who left. Another way is to attempt direct contact with the students after they leave the university, and ask about their reasons for leaving and plans for the future. In this study, we attempted the latter with the hope of obtaining information that could be used to inform retention efforts at the university.

METHODS

The Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at WSU, was contracted to administer this survey of non-returning students. Dr. John Tarnai was the project’s principal investigator, and Yi Jen Wang the study director. The Office of Research and Assessment in The Division of Student Affairs, Equity and Diversity provided SESRC with the survey content and contact information for the study population. SESRC submitted materials to the Institutional Review Board, trained the interviewers, and conducted and monitored the interviews, which were conducted via telephone.

The content of the survey largely focused on the reasons students had for leaving WSU. Respondents were also asked what the students’ intentions were upon their initial enrollment at WSU, whether they were enrolled at another higher education institution at the time of the survey or planned to in the future, and whether they intended to return to WSU.

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. Students who graduated from the university in the Fall 2007 term, students who were excused from school for deficient academic standing, and students dismissed for conduct violations were not included in the survey population. After making these exclusions, the total population of non-returning students was 921. SESRC attempted an average of six call attempts with each of these students. The non-returning students themselves were the primary contacts, but if the student was unable to complete the interview at the time of the call, a parent or guardian was given the option to respond. This option was given to maximize the information collected. 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. (In cases where a parent or guardian completed the survey for the student, the student’s demographics are the ones reflected in the table.) The survey sample closely reflected the population in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class.

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

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.
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%). Only 6% intended to use WSU as a stepping stone to a different school, and just 1% enrolled with the intent to take a few courses and leave college. The remaining students (5%) enrolled at WSU with no definite purpose in mind.
Sixty-five percent (65%) of the respondents were either already enrolled at another college or planned to do so in the future. A small portion of students (6%) remained undecided about their plans to enroll elsewhere.

By far, the most commonly named schools were Washington community or technical colleges. The University of Washington was the most named four-year school. Combining responses where no specific campus was named with responses for the UW-Tacoma campus, 17 respondents had plans to attend the university. Twenty-one respondents named the state’s regional universities of Eastern Washington University (9), Western Washington University (7), and Central Washington University (6). Five respondents named Washington private universities (Gonzaga University, 3; Seattle University, 1; Whitworth University, 1). Out-of-state institutions comprised 51 of the responses. Most of these schools were four-year institutions, though some community colleges were mentioned. Five respondents indicated enrollment at an art or film school either in Washington or elsewhere.
Plans to re-enroll at WSU were split among the respondents. Slightly more respondents indicated an intention to return to WSU (43%) than indicated no plans to return (39%). The proportion of undecided respondents on this question was quite a bit larger than the undecided on the previous two questions.

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. An emotional, health, or family-related circumstance was cited by 24% of the respondents as a major reason for leaving WSU. Other common major reasons included a desire to move to a new location (23%), dissatisfaction with academic performance (20%), a desire to get away from college for a while (18%), and a failure to receive enough financial help to cover costs (15%). 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.

Most of the circumstances cited often as major reasons for leaving could be described as personal reasons. That is, the causes for leaving reside within the students themselves. Lack of financial assistance would be the strongest exception to that characterization, though it does still carry a personal component. While the university is somewhat limited in what it can do to address personal reasons for students leaving, efforts to make the university an appealing place to live and learn could help mitigate some loss of students.
Circumstances cited most often as major reasons for leaving WSU

*All respondent types*

- An emotional, health, or family-related circumstance: 24%
- Desire to move to a new location: 23%
- Dissatisfaction with academic performance: 20%
- Desire to get away from college for a while: 18%
- Failure to receive enough financial help to cover costs: 15%
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 a desire to work instead of attending college (20%), two issues related to faculty interaction (19% each), and poor academic advising (17%). A desire to work instead of attending school, like some of the most often cited major reasons, reflects a personal issue. The remaining three, however, all center on some sort of dissatisfaction with faculty or other academic staff at the university.

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. Only 5% of the respondents cited inadequate facilities as a reason for leaving. Other circumstances that did not factor often as reasons for leaving were lack of challenging courses (7%), inadequate support for social activities (10%), failure to get into desired major (10%), difficulty making friends at WSU (12%), inadequate housing choices (13%), and influence of parents or relatives (13%).
Circumstances cited most often as minor reasons for leaving WSU

All respondent types

- Desire to get away from college for a while: 25%
- Dissatisfaction with academic performance: 24%
- Desire to work instead of attending college: 20%
- Desire to move to a new location: 19%
- Too little contact with faculty: 19%
- Unsatisfying interactions with faculty: 17%
- Poor academic advising: 17%
- An emotional, health, or family-related circumstance: 17%
Circumstances cited least often as reasons for leaving WSU

All respondent types

- Inadequate facilities: 5%
- Lack of challenging courses: 7%
- Inadequate support for social activities: 10%
- Failure to get into desired major: 10%
- Trouble finding employment: 11%
- Difficulty making friends at WSU: 12%
- Inadequate housing choices: 13%
- Influence of parents or relatives: 13%
Responses to the survey were split into different subgroups of respondents in situations where the respondent type might be correlated with the responses. One such split was made between responses given by the non-returning students themselves and responses given by parents or guardians of the non-returning students. Another split was made between responses for ethnic minority students and responses for Caucasian respondents. And a final split was made between the different types of schools at which respondents said they had enrolled or plan to enroll.

The reasons for leaving given by students showed noticeable difference from the responses given by parents or guardians on four circumstances. Students were more likely to claim there were too many required courses or that they left for an emotional, health, or family-related circumstance. In the case of the latter, 42% of the students cited this reason to some degree, compared to 30% of parents, but the most striking difference was in the proportion who gave this circumstance status as a major reason. Among the students, 27% of their responses indicated this was a major reason, while only 9% of the parents/guardians responded likewise. The reasons cited more often by parents/guardians than students were difficulty making friends (23% vs. 11%) and inadequate budget planning (25% vs. 15%).

Comparisons between responses for minority and Caucasian students suggested real differences between the two groups on two potential reasons for leaving WSU. Minority respondents were less likely to cite dissatisfaction with academic performance as a reason for leaving. Caucasian respondents cited this circumstance as a major or minor reason 46% of the time, whereas minority respondents only cited the circumstance 32% of the time. Conversely, minority respondents were more likely to offer that a desire to move to a new location influenced the decision to leave WSU. Here, 57% of the minority respondents said this circumstance was a reason for leaving, and 40% of Caucasians said the same.

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. Only 3% of students with enrollment intentions at another Washington four-year public university gave that response, and 8% of respondents naming an out-of-state institution responded that way. Majorities in both the Washington four-year public university and out-of-state university groups cited a desire to move to a new location as a reason for leaving WSU. This factor was not as strong for the WA CTC group. Interestingly, 38% of the Washington four-year public university group left WSU because they failed to receive any financial help. This proportion was no higher than 18% among the WA CTC and out-of-state groups. Similar results occurred for the circumstance of failing to receive enough financial help to cover costs.

At the close of the structured portion of the survey interview, the respondents were given an opportunity to freely comment on the survey and offer advice to new WSU students. From these 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.

The open comments also provide some guidance for modifying the survey if it is administered in the future. It might be a good idea to add to the list of potential reasons for leaving the circumstance of leaving for military reasons. Also, students missing school for an internship should be asked the questions about enrollment intentions, but probably do not need to go through the list of potential reasons for leaving.
**QUESTIONS ASKED ON THE NON-RETURNING STUDENTS SURVEY**

**Q1:**
I would like to ask you a few questions about your educational plans. First, why did you enroll at WSU? Would you say you had no definite purpose in mind, you wanted to take a few courses and then leave college, you wanted to take a few courses and then transfer to another school, you wanted to earn a bachelor's degree or certification, or you wanted to earn a graduate degree?

- No definite purpose in mind .......................................................... 1
- To take a few courses and then leave college .................................. 2
- To take a few courses and then transfer to another school .............. 3
- To earn a bachelor's degree or certification .................................... 4
- To earn a graduate degree ............................................................... 5
- Don't know .................................................................................... D
- Refused ............................................................................................ R

**Q2:**
Do you plan to re-enroll at WSU in the future?

- Yes .................................................................................................... 1
- No .................................................................................................... 2
- Undecided ......................................................................................... 3
- Don't know ..................................................................................... D
- Refused ............................................................................................ R

**Q3:**
Are you currently enrolled at a college other than WSU or do you plan to do so in the future? (IWR: If yes, probe for which school.)

- Yes ................................................................................................... 1 O
- No .................................................................................................... 2
- Undecided ......................................................................................... 3
- Don't know ..................................................................................... D
- Refused ............................................................................................ R

**Q4A:**
Now I would like to ask you about why you did not enroll at WSU for the Spring semester. I have a list of 25 possible situations. For each situation, please tell me if it was a major reason for you not enrolling, a minor reason, or not a reason. The first reason is Problems getting into required classes. Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?

- A major reason ............................................................................... 1
- A minor reason ............................................................................... 2
- Not a reason .................................................................................. 3
- Don't know .................................................................................. D
- Refused .......................................................................................... R
Q4B:
The second reason is Failure to get into desired major. Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?
A major reason................................................................. 1
A minor reason............................................................... 2
Not a reason........................................................................ 3
Don't know.......................................................................... D
Refused.............................................................................. R

Q4C:
(The next reason is) Poor academic advising. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason................................................................. 1
A minor reason............................................................... 2
Not a reason........................................................................ 3
Don't know.......................................................................... D
Refused.............................................................................. R

Q4D:
(The next reason is) Inadequate housing choices. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason................................................................. 1
A minor reason............................................................... 2
Not a reason........................................................................ 3
Don't know.......................................................................... D
Refused.............................................................................. R

Q4E:
(The next reason is) Inadequate facilities. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason................................................................. 1
A minor reason............................................................... 2
Not a reason........................................................................ 3
Don't know.......................................................................... D
Refused.............................................................................. R

Q4F:
(The next reason is) Inadequate support for social activities. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason................................................................. 1
A minor reason............................................................... 2
Not a reason........................................................................ 3
Don't know.......................................................................... D
Refused.............................................................................. R
Q4G:
(The next reason is) Unsatisfying interactions with faculty. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know..........................................................................D
Refused...............................................................................R

Q4H:
(The next reason is) Uncomfortable social climate on campus. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know..........................................................................D
Refused...............................................................................R

Q4I:
(The next reason is) Size of the population of WSU. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know..........................................................................D
Refused...............................................................................R

Q4J:
(The next reason is) Dissatisfaction with academic performance. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know..........................................................................D
Refused...............................................................................R

Q4K:
(The next reason is) Lack of challenging courses. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know..........................................................................D
Refused...............................................................................R
Q4L:  
(The next reason is) Too many required courses. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.........................................................1
A minor reason.......................................................2
Not a reason...........................................................3
Don't know...............................................................D
Refused.........................................................................R

Q4M:  
(The next reason is) Poor quality of instruction. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.........................................................1
A minor reason.......................................................2
Not a reason...........................................................3
Don't know...............................................................D
Refused.........................................................................R

Q4N:  
(The next reason is) Too little contact with faculty. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.........................................................1
A minor reason.......................................................2
Not a reason...........................................................3
Don't know...............................................................D
Refused.........................................................................R

Q4O:  
(The next reason is) Too many large classes. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.........................................................1
A minor reason.......................................................2
Not a reason...........................................................3
Don't know...............................................................D
Refused.........................................................................R

Q4P:  
(The next reason is) Desire to get away from college for a while. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.........................................................1
A minor reason.......................................................2
Not a reason...........................................................3
Don't know...............................................................D
Refused.........................................................................R
Q4Q:
(The next reason is) Desire to move to a new location. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don’t know...........................................................................D
Refused..................................................................................R

Q4R:
(The next reason is) Difficulty making friends at WSU. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don’t know...........................................................................D
Refused..................................................................................R

Q4S:
(The next reason is) An emotional, health, or family-related circumstance. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don’t know...........................................................................D
Refused..................................................................................R

Q4T:
(The next reason is) Influence of parents or relatives. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don’t know...........................................................................D
Refused..................................................................................R

Q4U:
(The next reason is) Failure to receive ANY financial help. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don’t know...........................................................................D
Refused..................................................................................R
Q4V:
(The next reason is) Failure to receive enough financial help to cover costs. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know.........................................................................D
Refused................................................................................R

Q4W:
(The next reason is) Inadequate budget planning. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know.........................................................................D
Refused................................................................................R

Q4X:
(The next reason is) Trouble finding employment. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know.........................................................................D
Refused................................................................................R

Q4Y:
(The next reason is) Desire to work instead of attending college. (Would you say it was a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason for you not enrolling?)
A major reason.................................................................1
A minor reason...............................................................2
Not a reason........................................................................3
Don't know.........................................................................D
Refused................................................................................R

THX:
That was my last question. If you have any additional comments or questions about this survey (or anything you would say to new WSU students that you think might help them the most,) I can note them now. Thank you very much for your time and responses.
Yes, Comments....................................................................1 O
No comments........................................................................2