



FIRST YEAR RETENTION STUDY

UNIVERSITY OFFICE OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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This study on attrition rates and first year retention is the first ever for the University of the West Indies. We shall, therefore, be grateful for suggestions on how it can be improved. The person who took full responsibility for this under my supervision was Ms. Tiffany Best. Helpful comments on the first draft were provided by Dr. John Gedeon and Mr. Harold Wall.

I trust that this study will help us to understand better (from another dimension) what is actually happening at UWI and why. Undoubtedly it will add to what you already know.

Please let us know if this is helpful and let us have your suggestions at pvcplan@sta.uwi.edu or tiffany.best@sta.uwi.edu.

Bhoendradatt Tewarie
Pro Vice Chancellor, Planning and Development

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	V
INTRODUCTION	1
NEEDS AND PROBLEMS.....	1
GOALS & OBJECTIVES	1
METHODOLOGY	2
STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	2
ATTRITION RATES.....	2
END STATUS	2
DEMOGRAPHICS.....	3
FACTORS INFLUENCING NON-RETURNING STUDENTS.....	4
TRENDS SEEN BY CAMPUS	7
Cave Hill.....	8
Mona	8
St. Augustine.....	9
MAIN FINDINGS	9
Personal Factors.....	9
Institutional Factors	9
LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY	10
IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS	10
University Matriculation Process	10
The University Experience.....	10
Social Experience.....	11
Family/Personal Factors.....	11
Work Demands.....	12
REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS.....	12
University Application Process.....	12
University Experience	13
Non-Academic Issues.....	14
REFERENCES	15

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: STUDENT ATTRITION RATES	2
TABLE 2: STUDENT END STATUSES.....	3
TABLE 3: STUDENT END STATUSES BY CAMPUS	3
TABLE 4: FACTORS WITH IMPORTANT TO EXTREMELY IMPORTANT RATING BY CAMPUS.....	7

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS	4
FIGURE 2: CHIEF REASON FOR LEAVING UWI.....	5
FIGURE 3: FACTORS WITH IMPORTANT TO EXTREMELY IMPORTANT RATINGS.....	6

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student retention is a topic that is extremely important to universities. A high attrition rate has economic implications for the student as well as the university. This report investigates the main influences on the student's decision not to return to the University of the West Indies after completing their first year of study.

A total of 183 students participated in the study, non-returning students were given a questionnaire that asked them to rate a list of factors in terms of its level of importance on their decision not to return to the University. The students were also asked to choose the single most important factor that influenced their decision to drop out.

The results revealed a variety of reasons that influence student attrition. Most of the factors that were given as the chief reasons as well as those that received the highest ratings on their level of influence were personal and institutional in nature. Those that featured highly were "Decided to attend another university or tertiary learning institution (TLI)", "Changed career plans", "Course availability" "Financial difficulty", "Dissatisfied with grades" and "conflict between job and University"

This study suggest that there are several University functions that if improved could provide personal support to the first year student; these include improvements in the matriculation process, academic advising and campus support systems (personal and financial counseling, medical facilities etc.). There were also institutional characteristics that could be enhanced to serve the academic needs of the student, namely, course availability and pedagogical issues.

Suggestions made based on the findings focus on changes to the guidance and support systems of the University. These include changes to the University application process, academic career planning, teacher evaluations, IDU workshops and campus support systems.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides information and data regarding student retention and attrition at the University of the West Indies. The report summarizes primary reasons associated with student departure obtained from a student survey that was administered to freshman students who did not return for their second year of study.

UWI seeks to develop a better understanding of factors associated with students' attrition after completing their first year of study, in the hope of developing programs and/or interventions that can increase second-year retention. This project aims to determine the extent of second-year dropout on all campuses and will examine the factors students report as influencing their decision not to return to the University after completing their first year of study.

NEEDS AND PROBLEMS

Retention is important for a variety of reasons. For students, a premature departure from university may lead to a disruption of life plans for the students and their families, and may cause economic disadvantages for the student.

High attrition rates also present problems for the university. Government support may be a challenge on some campuses; therefore campuses may become vulnerable due to loss of student tuition. The retention of students is necessary for financial stability and to sustain academic programs. Studies show that it is more financially effective for institutions to retain current students than continually recruit more to replace those who terminate their education prematurely (Schultz, Dickman, Campbell and Snow, 1992). High attrition rates may also be indicative of academic failure or some form of dissatisfaction with the university experience. Both of these should prompt concern on the part of a caring institution.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the first year attrition rates for UWI? (i.e. the percentage of freshmen deciding not to return to UWI for their second year of study).
2. What factors do students identify as influencing their decision not to return to UWI for their second year of study?

In answering these questions, the University Office of Planning & Development hopes our time to collect data that will not only shed light on first-year attrition but highlight issues that may affect the persistence to degree rate. The results of this survey should assist UWI to develop student support systems that will strengthen persistence rates.

METHODOLOGY

This study is an applied research project, quantitative in nature and employing the survey method. A database of students who registered for the 2008/09 academic year but did not return for the 2009/10 year was provided by the campus IT units.

The survey was mailed and sent electronically via email to non-returning students. A month after the dispatch of questionnaires, the staff of the OPD and the Planning Offices (Campus) administered the survey over the telephone to the non-returning students due to low response rates (of the returned questionnaires, 21% were returned via email, 24% via postal mail and 55% of all completed questionnaires were administered over the telephone).

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Frequency analyses provided statistical measures for assessing variations in responses.

ATTRITION RATES

Table 1 shows the attrition rates based on new admissions for the 2008/2009 academic year. Approximately 11% of the new admissions for 2008/2009 academic year did not return to continue their studies for the 2009/2010 academic year. The campus with the highest attrition rates was the St. Augustine campus.

TABLE 1: STUDENT ATTRITION RATES

Campus	New Admissions	Non-returning students	Attrition rates
	2008/2009	2009/2010	
Mona	3331	299	9.0%
Cave Hill	1992	199	10.0%
St. Augustine	3267	446	13.7%
University Total	8590	944	11.0%

END STATUS

Based on the records provided by campus IT units, Table2 illustrates the end status categories for students who did not return for their second year of study. Of the 944 non-returning students most were “Required to Withdraw” by their campuses. A high percentage of students were also classified as “Active not Registered”, these students failed to return for their second year of study and did not provide the University with any notification of withdrawal.

TABLE 2: STUDENT END STATUSES.

End Status	Definition	University Percentage	N
Leave of Absence	Student formally requested a leave of absence	13.2	110
Transferred	Student transferred to another UWI campus	9.0	75
Required to Withdraw	Students were required to withdraw due to poor academic performance	42.6	355
Voluntary Withdrawal	Student formally withdrew from the University	4.1	34
Active not Registered	The student is supposed to continue but did not register for the 2009/2010 academic year but did not submit a letter requesting a Leave of Absence or Voluntary Withdrawal.	31.1	260
*Status Missing	Unable to determine end status of student		110
Total		100%	944

* Students with missing end statuses were omitted from the analysis

Table 3 displays the end status distribution by campus. The St. Augustine campus showed the smallest percentage of students submitting a leave of absence but had the highest percentage of “Active not Registered” students. The Mona campus displayed the highest percentage of students that were required to withdraw, followed by the Cave Hill campus.

TABLE 3: STUDENT END STATUSES BY CAMPUS

CAMPUS	LEAVE OF ABSENCE	N	TRANS-FERRED	N	REQUIRED TO WITHDRAW		VOLUNTARY WITHDRAWAL		ACTIVE NOT REGISTERED		TOTAL
					N	PERCENTAGE	N	PERCENTAGE	N	PERCENTAGE	
Cave Hill	24.1%	48	1.0%	2	48.7%	97	3.5%	7	22.6%	45	199
Mona	24.3%	46	0%	0	68.3%	129	7.4%	14	0%	0	189
St. Augustine	3.6%	16	16.4%	73	28.9%	129	2.9%	13	48.2%	215	446
University	13.2%	110	9.0%	75	42.6%	355	4.1%	34	31.2%	260	834
Total											

* *Students with missing end statuses (n = 110) were omitted from the analysis

DEMOGRAPHICS

For the purposes of this report, the survey was not administered to students who were “Required to Withdraw” nor to those who transferred to another UWI campus. Of the 944 students who failed to register for the 2009/10 academic year, 514 non-returnees qualified to participate in the project. Students that were required to withdraw were omitted from this study because the focus of the study was the body of students who voluntarily left the UWI. Of

the 514 students invited to participate, 183 students responded to the survey yielding a University-wide response rate of 35%. Most respondents were female (67%), from the Faculty of Social Sciences (33%), in the 20-24 age range (47%) and attended UWI on a full-time basis (63%). The chart below displays the demographic characteristics of the non-returning students.

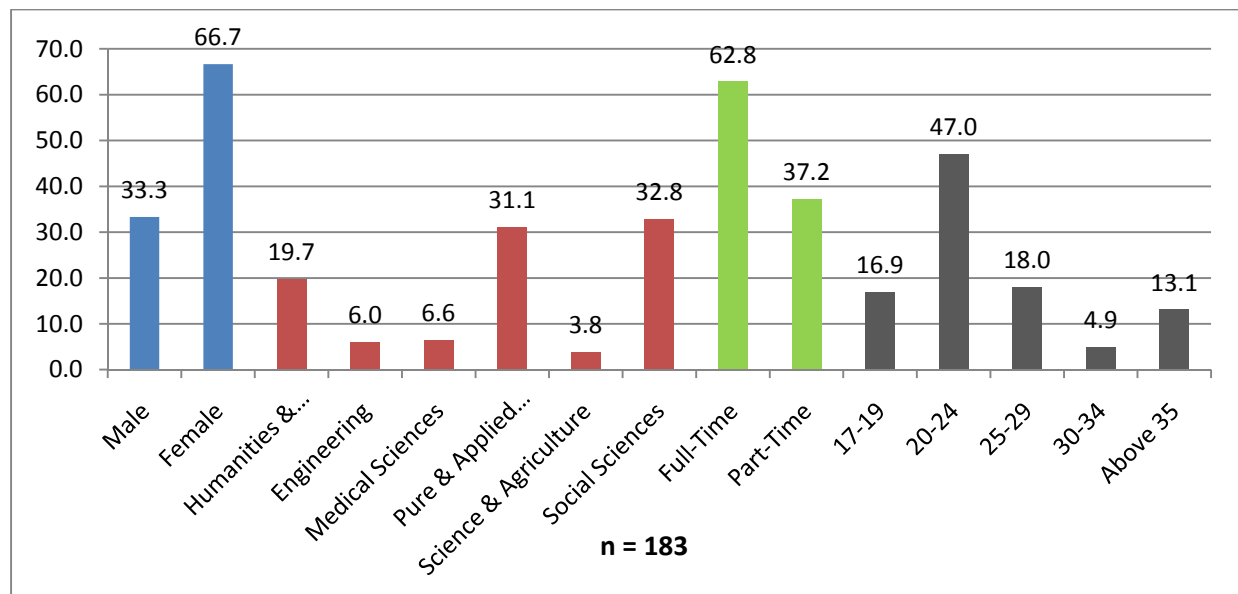


FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

FACTORS INFLUENCING NON-RETURNING STUDENTS

Data collected from the survey revealed that students withdrew from UWI for diverse reasons, from size of class to experiencing emotional problems. When non-returnees were asked to give “the single most important reason for leaving” 13.4% of all students surveyed listed conflict between the demands of the job and the University as being the main influence on their decision not to return. Similarly, 12.2% of non-returnees cited personal or family illness as the main reason that caused them to drop out. Course/programme availability, deciding to attend another University or TLI(tertiary learning institution), and change of career plans also ranked in the top five most influential factors which affected a student’s decision not to return to the University (Figure 2).

The non-returning students were also asked to rate the same factors on a scale of “Unimportant” to “Extremely Important” in its influence on their decision to leave. Figure 3 shows the percentage of students that gave a rating of “Important and Extremely Important” for each factor. As seen with the chief reasons given, most students cited attending another University or TLI, course availability and changed career plans as most influential on their

decisions to not return. Financial difficulty and dissatisfaction with grades were also cited as having an important or extremely important influence on their decision to leave (Figure 3)

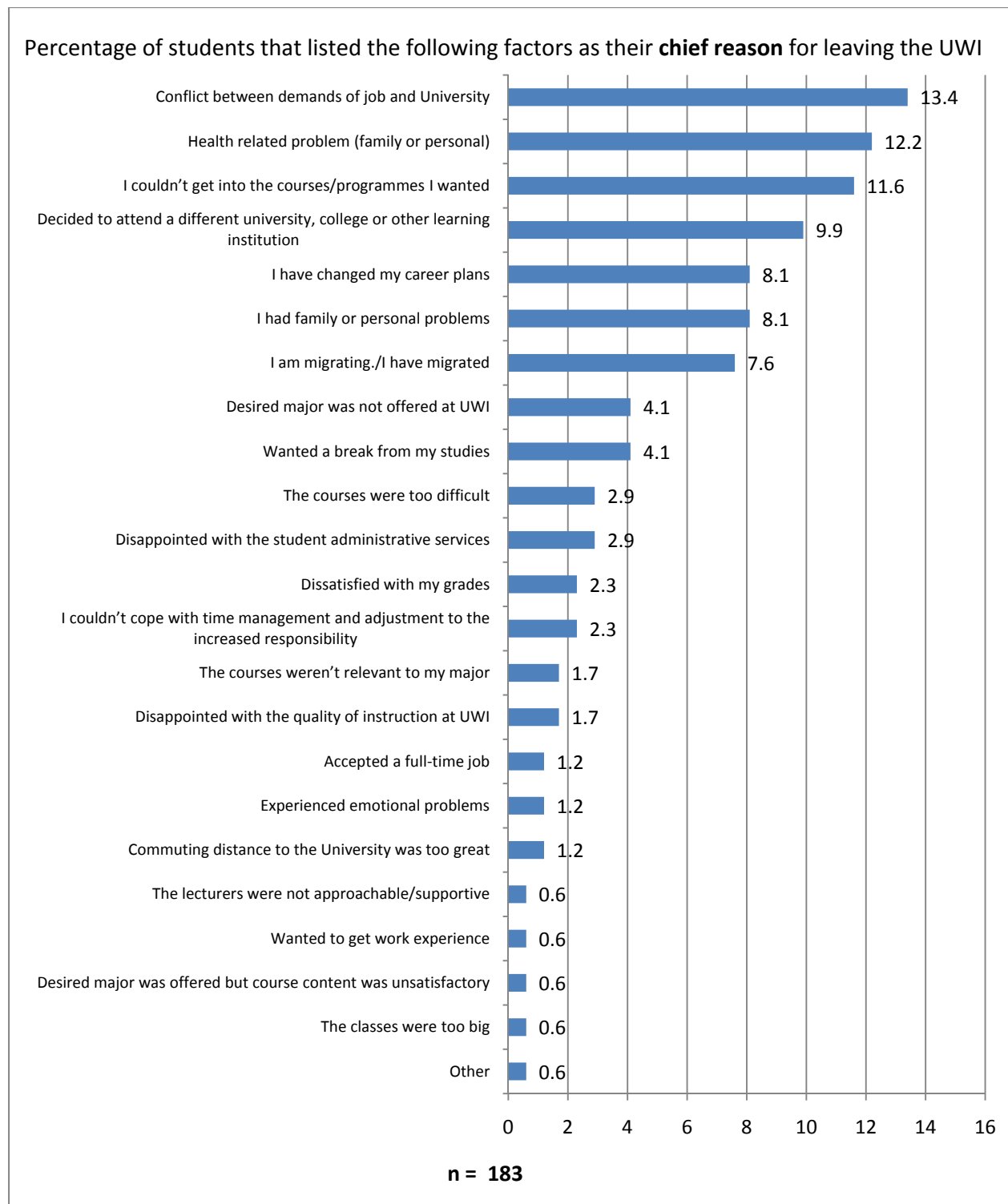


FIGURE 2: CHIEF REASON FOR LEAVING UWI

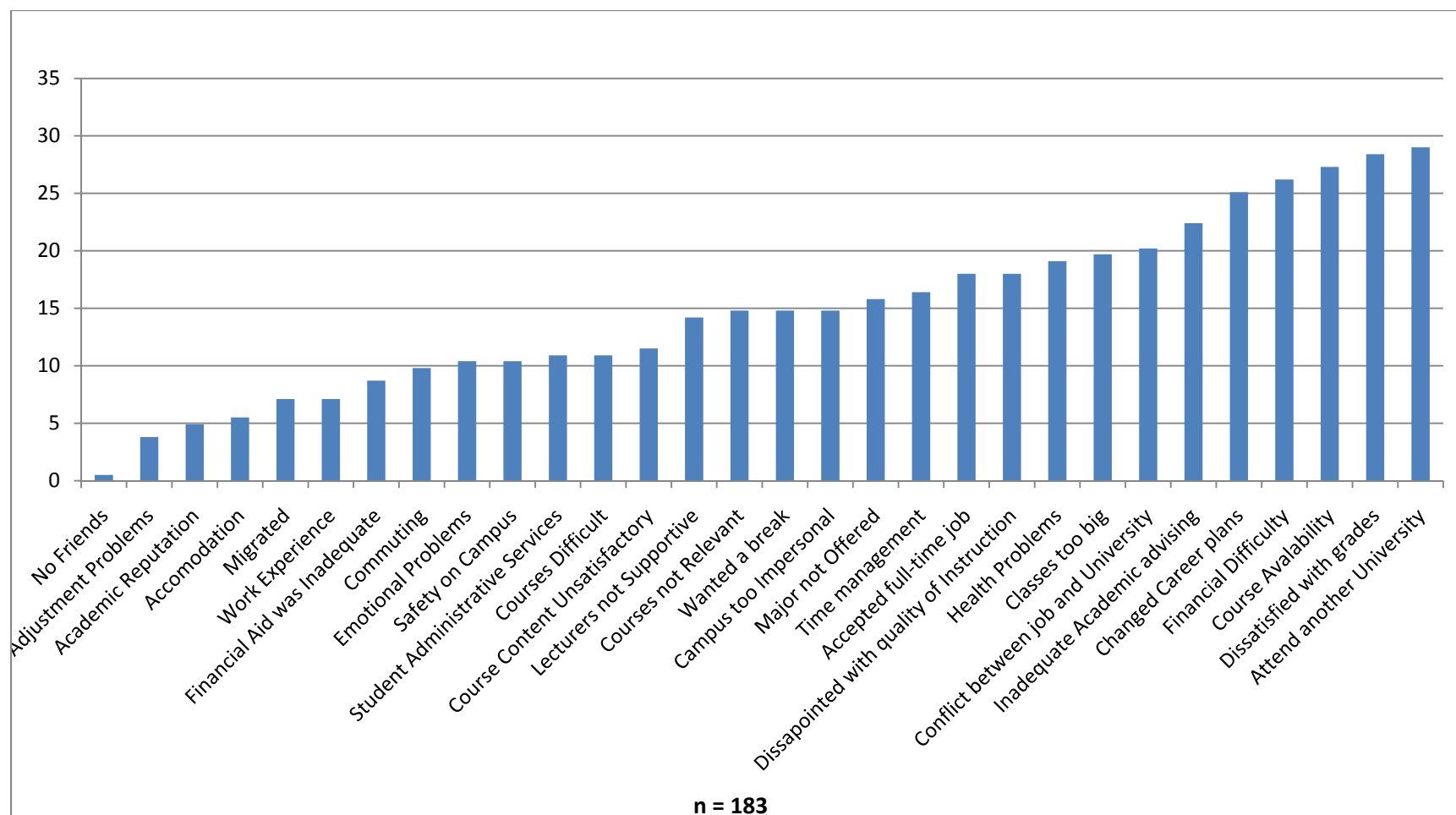


FIGURE 3: FACTORS WITH IMPORTANT TO EXTREMELY IMPORTANT RATINGS

TRENDS SEEN BY CAMPUS

The percentage of students that gave Important to Extremely important ratings on each of the factors was disaggregated by campus and the following trends emerged (See Table 4).

TABLE 4: FACTORS WITH IMPORTANT TO EXTREMELY IMPORTANT RATING BY CAMPUS

FACTORS	CAMPUS		
	CAVE HILL	MONA	ST. AUGUSTINE
The courses were too difficult	13.0%	7.5%	13.0%
The courses weren't relevant	6.5%	14.9%	17.6%
I couldn't get into the courses/programme I wanted	25.8%	29.9%	25.9%
The classes were too big	16.1%	23.9%	17.6%
Dissatisfied with my grades	25.8%	40.3%	20.0%
Desired major was not offered at UWI	22.6%	14.9%	14.1%
Desired major was offered but course content was unsatisfactory	12.9%	13.4%	9.4%
I had financial difficulty with my fees and living expenses.	32.3%	46.3%	8.2%
I had family or personal problems.	51.6%	34.3%	23.5%
Health related problem (family or personal)	29.0%	17.9%	16.5%
I have changed my career plans	22.6%	31.3%	21.2%
I am migrating./I have migrated	6.5%	6.0%	8.2%
I didn't have many friends at the University	.0%	.0%	1.2%
I had difficulty adjusting to life away from home	3.2%	1.5%	5.9%
I couldn't cope with time management and adjustment to the increased responsibility	32.3%	13.4%	12.9%
Decided to attend a different university, college or other learning institution	6.5%	40.3%	28.2%
Experienced emotional problems	12.9%	16.4%	4.7%
Accepted a full-time job	19.4%	11.9%	22.4%
Conflict between demands of job and University	25.8%	13.4%	23.5%
Wanted to get work experience	16.1%	4.5%	5.9%
Wanted a break from my studies	32.3%	11.9%	10.6%
The campus was too impersonal	12.9%	10.4%	18.8%
I didn't feel safe on campus	.0%	9.0%	15.3%
The lecturers were not approachable/supportive	6.5%	14.9%	16.5%
I had difficulty finding adequate/affordable accommodation near campus.	.0%	9.0%	4.7%
Commuting distance to the University was too great	3.2%	14.9%	8.2%
Disappointed with the quality of instruction at UWI	19.4%	16.4%	18.8%
Academic advising was inadequate	22.6%	22.4%	22.4%
Dissatisfied with the academic reputation of UWI	3.2%	3.0%	7.1%
Financial aid received was inadequate	12.9%	13.4%	3.5%
Disappointed with the student administrative services	6.5%	9.0%	14.1%
Total N	31	67	85

Cave Hill

At Cave Hill campus, more than 50% of the students participating in the survey rated family or personal problems as a major influence on their decision not to return while 34% of students reported this factor as a major influence at Mona and 24% on the St. Augustine campus. Also, 29% of students on the Cave Hill campus listed health related problems as a major influence. These percentages were higher than on the Mona and St. Augustine campuses (18% and 17% respectively).

Almost a third of the non-returnees listed time management and adjustment to responsibilities as a major influence on their decision to drop out at the Cave Hill campus. However, approximately 13% of students at the St. Augustine and Mona campuses gave this factor an important or extremely important rating.

A higher percentage of students cited the factor “desired major was not offered at UWI” as a major influence on their decision not to return for their second year of study (23%). This compared to 15% and 14% of students that rated this factor as important or extremely important for the Mona and St. Augustine campuses respectively.

A higher percentage of non-returnees from the Cave Hill campus rated “wanted to get work experience” (16%) as a major influence. This compared to 5% and 6% on the Mona and St. Augustine campuses respectively. Also, 32% of non-returnees cited “wanted a break from studies” as a major influence this compared to 12% at Mona and 11% at St. Augustine.

Mona

More than 46% of non-returnees listed financial difficulty with fees and living expenses as a major influence on their decision to drop out. This compares to 32% at Cave Hill and 8% on the St. Augustine campus.

More than 40% of students on the Mona campus rated “dissatisfied with my grades” as an important or extremely important factor in their decision drop out from the University this percentage was much higher than what was seen on the Cave Hill (26%) and St. Augustine (20%) campuses. However, only 7.5% of the Mona students listed “the courses were too difficult” as a major influence on their decision to drop out while 13% of students on both Cave Hill and St. Augustine campuses listed this as a major influence.

Approximately 40% of the non-returnees at Mona decided to attend another University or TLI while 28% of students on the St. Augustine campus listed this as a major influence and 7% of non-returnees rated this factor as important or extremely important at Cave Hill.

Also, a higher percentage of non-returnees on the Mona campus reported a change in career plans as a major influence on their decision not to return (31%) when compared to Cave Hill (23%) and St. Augustine (21%).

St. Augustine

On the St. Augustine campus more than 15% of students rated safety on campus as a major influence on their decision not to return to the University this compared to 9% of students on the Mona campus while no students rated this factor as an important or extremely important influence on their decision not to return at the Cave Hill campus.

MAIN FINDINGS

Reviewing results from the chief reasons given by the students as well as the level of importance ratings two interlinked but discernible themes emerge: personal factors that influence the student's decision to drop out and institutional factors that influence the student's decision to leave.

Personal Factors

The number one chief reason cited for leaving the UWI was conflict between demands of the job and the University (Figure 2). The majority of students attend the University on a full-time basis but many students also have financial commitments, the student may encounter difficulty balancing their academic and work demands. Although full-time students are restricted from having full-time jobs 43% (Figure 1) of the students reported working on a full-time basis. During the matriculation process students may not be informed of this restriction or be adequately advised of the effects of having a full-time job on their academic performance.

Many students may decide to seek employment in order to pay certain University fees and tuition. This is evidenced where 32% of students on the Cave Hill campus and 46% of students on the Mona campus reported financial difficulties with their University fees and living expenses (Table 4).

A family or personal health related problem was the second highest chief reason given for dropping out of the University (Figure 2). Health related problems could have an impact on the student finances, Health related problems may also indicate that the University may not be providing adequate or appropriate support services to the student.

Institutional Factors

Approximately 29% of students gave important or extremely important ratings to their decision to attend another University or TLI as a major influence on their decision to drop out of the

UWI. The student's decision to attend another university or TLI can be linked to unavailability of desired courses or programmes. The student may also be influenced to switch to another university due to a change in career plans, or the student may have been dissatisfied with their grades. The University may want to consider administrative planning and academic career planning and strengthening of academic advising to address these issues.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The primary limitation associated with this study was the small number of respondents (n=183) this small sample size affects the ability to obtain statistically significant results from the data although it does represent 29% of the group identified for analysis. Nonetheless, caution should be exercised in generalizing findings of the University population of non-returning students.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The underlying causes for student attrition on the UWI campus is varied, but could be classified by institutional as well as personal factors as discussed under main findings. The underlying contributors to these institutional and personal factors can be grouped into five main categories:

University Matriculation Process

The University's approach to the selection and matriculation of successful candidates may have to be revisited. The selection of first-time students is heavily grade focused, the University does not currently employ procedures that assess the candidate's preparation for tertiary education, whether it may be personal or financial readiness. Also, candidates do not receive counseling to guide them on which programmes may be the best fit for their individual talents and interests during the matriculation process.

The University Experience

The student in undertaking their first year at UWI may encounter several obstacles that could either influence their desire to continue at the University or may affect their academic performance in the programme. Many respondents listed programme and course availability as a factor in their decision not to return to the University, this occurrence may be significantly related to the non-returnees decision to attend another University or TLI.

The student transitioning from secondary school to the University may not be prepared for the demands of their specific programmes. Study habits that were successfully used during high school may fail at the University level. Students experiencing difficulty with their courses/programmes may not have an adequate support system on which they can rely for assistance. Many students cited poor academic advising as a leading influence in their decision

not to return to the University. An alternative explanation may be that the first year student may be reluctant to ask for assistance when they are encountering academic difficulties.

It would seem that the issue of appropriate guidance and support systems for first year students is something that requires immediate attention.

Certain aspects of the classroom environment may also influence the student's decision to drop out. Extremely large classes may affect the teaching dynamic, the student may be less willing to seek assistance from lecturers whom they may view as unapproachable.

Lastly, many students who do not gain entry into the programmes of their choice and are placed into substitute programmes during the matriculation process may experience a strong dissatisfaction with their second programme choices. When the student fails to gain entry into their preferred programme their overall motivation and subsequent academic performance may be negatively affected. If this is true the situation can only worsen if the student ends up with a third choice.

Social Experience

In embarking on their tertiary education journey, many first year students are moving from a structured environment regulated by their parents to an unstructured environment where the students are now responsible for themselves. In this new unstructured environment the student may encounter several distractions i.e. drinking, partying, drugs etc. that could affect the student's academic performance and indirectly influence their desire to return to the University.

Non-returning students also reported that the campus was too impersonal and they were not very involved in UWI social activities. This lack of social involvement or engagement may also lead the student to discontinue their studies at the University.

Family/Personal Factors

Students also reported issues with self-management. The student may not possess the time and/or self-management skills needed to perform under the demands of the University. The students may also encounter unexpected family and personal problems and without the proper University support systems the student may find it difficult to continue their studies. These support systems may include counseling, financial, medical facilities etc. Students also report financial issues as a contributing factor to their decision to leave. Living conditions including distance from campus as well as accommodation challenges may also affect the student's abilities to continue at the UWI.

Work Demands

Students often reported a conflict of work schedule and demands of working as a leading influence in their decision to not return at the University. The demands of the University are many and students who work full-time are going to encounter significant challenges. This finding is of particular interest since full-time students are restricted from working full-time yet approximate 43% of respondents reported that they worked a full-time job.

The issue of working and studying, a growing phenomenon across UWI, needs to be proactively addressed.

REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Student attrition rate is not a huge problem at UWI but with increasing numbers of working adults choosing UWI and with a wider choice of options available in the tertiary sector it may become a major challenge. Accordingly the following are worthy of consideration.

University Application Process

There may be a cultural bias operating in the admissions screening process which tacitly implies that secondary school grades is the primary predictor of academic success at the university level. While grades do play a major role, research on emotional intelligence would indicate that success in life is much more dependent on the affective skills and dispositions.

It is more likely than not that the admissions process on each campus varies somewhat. But academic institutions—if they wish to be learning organizations—should be aware of past problems and seek to minimize them with each student intake cycle. There may be need therefore, to look at the admissions screening process more closely. However, there is a definite need to design, create and enhance infrastructure and systems that would be more supportive of success for students at risk.

Moreover students should be made aware of what they are facing and personal sacrifices that they will have to make to be successful. UWI could, therefore, think in terms of two steps:

- (1) A readiness test to assist in the screening of applicants; and
- (2) A well thought through system for detecting students at risk and for supporting them once identified.

The readiness test could cover personal factors, personality, character, values, their current and forecast situations and plans, financial strategies, living away from home challenges, peer pressure, and career goals, to name a few. The last item is especially important as our educational systems from Form 3 onwards provide little career assistance. People select careers,

for inappropriate reasons for many: job security, ease of program, money-driven, parental pressures, what friends are doing, what is popular at the time, what is “glamorous,” etc. They then wind up changing their career as this study has demonstrated. Perhaps writing a one-page paper on what they want to achieve in life would focus them in a certain direction and then “how will this UWI programme assist you in achieving your life vision?” could emerge as an appropriate question. The readiness test results could form part of the student’s portfolio at appropriate stages of counseling.

University Experience

If the admissions screening process is handled better it would set the stage to forestall many academic problems once the student begins his/her programme here. Unfortunately, awareness of issues does not equate to skills to deal with them, so once the student is enrolled targeted programmes would need to be designed to impart these skills. The two issues it may address almost completely are the “career plan change” problem and the expectations or demands of the programme of study.

A first year course could also be designed to create awareness and student buy-in. In this course the student studies career possibilities in their field and actually interviews practitioners or works for short periods of time in the practice.

Programme and course availability issues can be addressed through both better advanced administrative planning and improved (internal) academic career planning and advising, so that students know their options up front, what is available and when. If some courses are not available locally they could be delivered via a distance mode from sister campuses or partnering institutions, regional or international. Course clashing can also be minimized with online and blended course formats.

The study revealed that academic failure is a prominent issue. This may seem to be a contradiction as the UWI selects the “cream of the crop” grade-wise. An answer may lie in the fact that whatever study habits made students successful in high school they continued to apply at the UWI and it did not produce the same results. There is also a belief that studying is “common sense” and not a skill that has to be learned. At no point in our education system do we deliberately teach study skills, therefore a workshop supported by online resources could be designed to deliver a course teaching such skills.

The hard linking of student evaluations to mandatory remedial action such as IDU intervention would go a long way to address pedagogical challenges if teacher-based problems were immediately identified.

Non-Academic Issues

Living in an unstructured environment away from direct parental supervision presents problems for students, especially when many have not been prepared for this experience. Alcohol, drugs, partying, boy-girl relationships, no one telling them how to plan their day, managing an apartment or dorm room, eating properly, exercising, and many other situations present challenges. Life-skill workshops, online learning resources, sensitivity groups, and counseling services could address these gaps in students' knowledge and skills.

While counseling, health, financial, academic, and career counseling services may exist to some degree in different forms on each campus, they could be strengthened with more resources. Even if they were fully resourced, though, an underlying cultural perception stands in the way of them making a difference: asking for help is a sign of weakness in our culture. What is needed is some type of intervention geared toward unlearning the hidden curriculum of primary and secondary education. Until students realize they have a problem and seek help they will continue to silently avoid addressing problems as they arise.

The educational technology solution can also be applied to many of our students who are employed full or part time with the burdens of juggling work, family, and study that can reach a breaking point. Instead of having to drive to the campus and back home after work, the student could go directly home and use those road hours towards study time online. It would also minimize conflict between working hours and class hours which often overlap to which many employers are unsympathetic.

In summary, we will never get attrition down to zero, but we should make every effort to minimize those causes that are foreseeable.

REFERENCES

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