



Why do College Students Choose to Stop Attending?

DR. JEFF MCCARTY

Originally published as “Self-Reported Reasons for College Student Attrition”

JOURNAL OF APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE COMMUNITY
COLLEGE, VOL 30, NUMBER 2, FALL 2023

Co-Authors: J. Carrier, A. DeDiego, and V. Thompson-Ebanks

College students drop out of school at a high rate

Seminal research into the phenomenon of attrition began in the 1970s with Tinto (1975) and has continued to expand

Much of the research is quantitative and focused on predicting behaviors

Very few qualitative studies that include the reasons students are dropping out have been conducted though some researchers have called for just that approach (Behr et al., 2021)

The purpose of this concurrent triangulation mixed methods research study was to discover the reasons students withdraw from college at a rural-serving mountain west community college.

Research Question 1: How do students describe their reasons for withdrawing from college?

Research Question 2: What are the frequencies of the reasons for withdrawal from college and are they different for different populations of students (age, race/ethnicity, and identified gender)?

Theoretical Framework

- > Based on the work of Vincent Tinto (1975)
- > Nora (2004) also looked at student/institution engagement and persistence
- > Later applied to community college students (Crisp & Nunez, 2014; Carales, 2020)

Integration (Hlinka, 2017; Kember et al., 2021; Schoon & Cook, 2021)

Transfer (Aulck & West, 2017; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2017)

Support (Xu, 2017; Choi, 2018; Roksa & Kinley, 2019)

Outside Pressure (Li et al., 2018; Ison, 2022)

Institutional and Student Diversity (Collum et al., 2021)

Time to Completion (Shields & O'Dwyer, 2017)

Structural Barriers (Osam et al., 2017)

Personal Characteristics (Rabla, 2017; Perea, 2020)

Universality of Retention Concerns (Tolliver & Miller, 2018; Collings & Eaton, 2021)

Student Influences (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016)

Attrition Rates have not Changed (Xu, 2017; Beadlescomb, 2019)

Gaps in the Literature

- > Very few studies have gathered reasons for attrition from students and education has changed significantly since the days of Tinto's (1975) original work (Behr et al., 2021; Kember et al., 2021)
- > Terriquez et al., (2015) was the only study in this review that asked students why they were leaving college ($n = 389$).

Research Design

- > Concurrent triangulation mixed methods design to examine the qualitative and quantitative data

Context

- > The campus is a rural Mountain West college with approximately 3,000 students, over 100 degree and certificate offerings, 35 student organizations, and an athletic program

Sample and Sampling

- > Every student who filled out a Complete Withdrawal form between Fall 2017 and Spring 2022 was initially included

Instrumentation

- > The exit survey is 23 items, mostly dealing with financial aid, but also including student name, birthdate, gender, ethnicity, and student number.
- > The data set was aggregated and deidentified by the office of Institutional Research before made available

Data Collection

- > In fall 2017, an open-ended question was added to the exit survey asking students to identify the reason for complete withdrawal from the college
- > The data set had 3,332 student respondents

Data Analysis

- > Included descriptive statistics
- > Individual reasons for withdrawal were coded and analyzed

Limitations and Delimitations

- > Using a pre-collected data set precludes asking any additional questions
- > There is no way to know what percentage of students who withdraw actually fill out the form
- > Decision was made to not include any additional potentially identifying information such as semester of withdrawal
- > Decision was made not to include high school aged respondents as the college has less agency with those students

Description of Participants

Identified Gender	<i>n</i>		<i>%</i>		
Female	1924		67.79		
Male	914		32.21		
Total	2838				

Age Range	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
18-24	1391	49.01	20.5	1.8
25-29	419	14.76	26.8	1.4
30-39	575	20.26	34.1	2.8
40-49	283	9.97	44.0	3.0
50+	170	5.99	56.8	6.6
Total	2838		28.7	10.8

RESULTS (CONTINUED)

Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
American Indian	52	1.83
Asian	21	0.74
Black or African American	47	1.66
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	9	0.32
Hispanic	271	9.55
Non-resident Alien	16	0.56
Two or More Races	59	2.08
Unknown	65	2.29
White	2298	80.97

RESULTS (CONTINUED)

Code Number	Code Label	% Overall Reasons
1	Money	13.53
2	Family	8.84
3	Time	5.64
4	College-related	14.13
5	Health	10.68
6	Transfer	8.42
7	Work	13.39
8	Moving	4.79
9	Other	20.58

RESULTS (CONTINUED)

Number of Reasons	<i>n</i>	%
Single	2333	82.21
Multiple	505	17.79

Family – “I made arrangements so I could take classes on Mondays from 6 to 9pm but the sitter now can't watch my daughter. I haven't been able to find another sitter. I started working full time as a [job], I'm a single mom and don't get child support. I think this semester I should focus on my job and getting my [credential], that way I can catch up on bills I need to pay. Next semester I can work only part time and be a full time student. I need to graduate soon but I can't keep piling up bills. I hope this decision doesn't affect my financial aid. I'll need it. Thank you.”

Health – “The stress I am under from both my personal and professional life is becoming too much for me to handle. In addition, my anxiety has gotten a lot worse because of everything going on in my life. The other night I had a panic attack that lasted for more than 45 minutes. I think it would be best for me and my health to do a complete withdrawal, especially if things are as bad as they are currently.”

College-related –

- > “I took this online class while I was working. Tests dates were closed when I could take the tests. I work nights and I'm not always able to test during their times. I wasn't receiving enough help to understand what I need to know.”
- > “The way online classes are set up makes it difficult for me to understand the material. Mostly because I am not in a real classroom with a teacher around to help. Email is too slow and miscommunication is a problem. Taking a difficult class without any close resources makes it incredibly difficult.”
- > “The class I was signed up for isn't set up to be very convenient. Also the cost of the class is more than what I was told it would be.”

“Certain campus staff have made me feel worthless and incompetent. So before proceeding with this financial commitment with what will turn out to be a failure I'm just withdrawing. I understand that your not here to hold someones hand but I have been made to feel like this will be unsuccessful. I would rather not commit myself to what seems to be a failure waiting to happen with lack of support and so many unanswered questions. Maybe I have reached out to the wrong channels but I have been made to feel like I'm wasting money and staffing time. No sense in a student bound to fail to show up. It would be nice though that students with struggles taht aren't visible to the eye have a more patient and understanding staff that doesn't make them feel ignorant and self-conscious. This wasn't entire campus staff but just enough to make my decision as this would not be a good fit. Thank you for your time.”

RESULTS (RESEARCH QUESTION #2)

Code Label	% Female Responses	% Male responses
Money	14.19	12.14
Family	9.72	7.00
Time	5.30	6.35
College-related	15.07	12.14
Health	11.90	8.10
Transfer	9.36	6.46
Work	9.77	21.01
Moving	5.25	3.83
Other	19.44	22.98

RESULTS (RQ #2 CONTINUED)

Code Label	% 18-24	% 25-29	% 30-39	% 40-49	% 50+
Money	13.66	12.65	14.96	12.01	12.35
Family	5.97	12.17	11.65	10.25	12.35
Time	5.54	5.01	5.04	4.95	11.18
College-related	12.65	15.04	13.74	17.31	20.00
Health	10.57	8.83	10.43	11.31	15.88
Transfer	10.42	7.16	7.30	5.65	3.53
Work	11.29	12.65	16.87	19.43	10.59
Moving	5.61	4.06	3.65	4.95	3.53
Other	24.30	22.43	16.35	14.13	10.59

RESULTS (RQ #2 CONTINUED)

	% American		% Black or African	% Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	% Hispanic	% Non- Resident Alien	%Two or More Races	% Unknown	% White
Code Label	Indian	% Asian	American						
Money	19.23	9.52	14.89	11.11	21.03	12.50	20.34	15.38	12.32
Family	11.54	4.76	10.64	0.00	11.44	18.75	10.17	6.15	8.49
Time	3.85	4.76	4.26	11.11	3.32	0.00	1.69	6.15	6.09
College- related	7.69	19.05	14.89	33.33	11.81	12.50	11.86	7.69	14.66
Health	11.54	4.76	6.38	0.00	7.01	0.00	10.17	9.23	11.40
Transfer	11.54	14.29	8.51	33.33	10.33	18.75	5.08	3.08	8.14
Work	9.62	19.05	12.77	0.00	12.18	12.50	15.25	20.00	13.40
Moving	3.85	4.76	4.26	0.00	4.80	25.00	5.08	12.31	4.48
Other	21.15	19.05	23.40	11.11	18.08	0.00	20.34	20.00	21.02

RESULTS (RQ #2 CONTINUED)

Code Label	% White	% Hispanic	% Non-White/Non-Hispanic
Money	12.32	21.03	16.36
Family	8.49	11.44	9.29
Time	6.09	3.32	4.09
College-related	14.66	11.81	11.90
Health	11.40	7.01	8.18
Transfer	8.14	10.33	8.92
Work	13.40	12.18	14.50
Moving	4.48	4.80	7.43
Other	21.02	18.08	19.33

RESULTS (RQ #2 CONTINUED)

Code Labels	% White	% BIPOC
Money	12.32	18.70
Family	8.49	10.37
Time	6.09	3.70
College-Related	14.66	11.85
Health	11.40	7.59
Transfer	8.14	9.63
Work	13.40	13.33
Moving	4.48	6.11
Other	21.02	18.70

SIGNIFICANT RESULTS FROM TWO SAMPLE Z TESTS FOR PROPORTIONS

Code Label	Female <i>n</i>	Male <i>n</i>	Z statistic	p value	Cohen's <i>h</i>
Family	187	64	2.38	0.017	0.10
College-Related	290	111	2.09	0.036	0.09
Health	229	74	3.06	0.002	0.13
Transfer	180	59	2.60	0.009	0.11
Work	188	192	-8.22	<.001	0.32
Other	374	210	-2.18	0.029	0.09

SIGNIFICANT RESULTS (CONTINUED)

Code Label	18-24 (<i>n</i> =1391) and 40-49 (<i>n</i> =283) year-olds		
	Z Statistic	p value	Cohen's h
Family	-2.63	.009	.16
College-Related	-2.10	.036	.13
Transfer	2.48	.013	.18
Work	-3.75	< .001	.23
Other	3.73	< .001	.26

SIGNIFICANT RESULTS (CONTINUED)

Code	White and Hispanic			White and Non-White/Non-Hispanic		
	Z Stat	p value	Cohen's h	Z Stat	p value	Cohen's h
Money	-4.00	<.001	.24			
Health	2.19	.029	.15			
Moving				-2.14	.032	.13

Code	White and BIPOC Students		
	Z stat	p value	Cohen's h
Money	-3.90	< .001	0.18
Time	2.17	.030	0.11
Health	2.58	.010	0.13

Community college students face many challenges (Thomsen, 2022; Turk & Gonzalez Canche, 2019)

Although several statistically significant differences were found in this data set, there were also many similarities across the board. It is a measure of their continued prevalence in our society that money and health inequities were found here.

Make Data Examination an Ongoing Process
Computer Access and Connectivity
Course Scheduling
Connect with Students
Mitigate Money Issues
Find New Ways to Support Female Students

Single campus data

The survey asks for “your reason” which may dissuade students from putting multiple reasons

Only included 4 variables when there is more data available

Women typically outnumber men on college campuses, but why are they also over-represented in the withdrawing population?

Did those transferring complete an educational goal?

Should there be more codes?

More institutions probably have similar data available. It would be nice if it were more generalizable.

- Attewell, P., & Monaghan, D. (2016). How many credits should an undergraduate take? *Research in Higher Education*, 57(6), 682–713. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-015-9401-z>
- Aulck, L., & West, J. (2017). Attrition and performance of community college transfers. *PLoS ONE*, 12(4), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0174683>
- Beadlescomb, T. L. (2019). BSW students of color: Principle factors influencing intent to persist through completion of degree. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 55(2), 215–223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2018.1544522>
- Behr, A., Giese, M., Tegum Kamdjou, H. D., & Theune, K. (2021). Motives for dropping out from higher education—An analysis of bachelor's degree students in Germany. *European Journal of Education*, 56(2), 325–343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12433>

Carales, V. D. (2020). Examining educational attainment outcomes: A focus on Latina/o community college students. *Community College Review*, 48(2), 195–219.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552120903087>

Choi, Y. (2018). Student employment and persistence: Evidence of effect heterogeneity of student employment on college dropout. *Research in Higher Education*, 59(1), 88–107.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9458-y>

Collings, R. D., & Eaton, L. G. (2021). The study place project: Using reciprocal determinism to improve first-year college GPA and retention. *College Student Journal*, 55(1), 89–103.

Collom, G. D., Biddix, J. P., & Svoboda, B. L. (2021). “I’m not letting nothing stop me this time”: Transitions among adult learners using the Tennessee reconnect grant. *Community College Review*, 49(4), 413–434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521211026679>

- Crisp, G., & Núñez, A. M. (2014). Understanding the racial transfer gap: Modeling underrepresented minority and nonminority students' pathways from two-to four-year institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, 37(3), 291–320. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2014.0017>
- Hlinka, K. R. (2017). Tailoring retention theories to meet the needs of rural Appalachian community college students. *Community College Review*, 45(2), 144–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552116686403>
- Ison, M. P. (2022). Dual enrollment, performance-based funding, and the completion agenda: An analysis of post-secondary credential outcomes of dual enrollment students by credential type. *Community College Review*, 50(1), 51–70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521211047673>
- Kember, D., Leung, D., & Prosser, M. (2021). Has the open door become a revolving door? The impact on attrition of moving from elite to mass higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(2), 258–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1629411>

- Li, A. Y., Gándara, D., & Assalone, A. (2018). Equity or disparity: Do performance funding policies disadvantage 2-year minority-serving institutions? *Community College Review*, 46(3), 288–315.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552118778776>
- Lichtenberger, E., & Dietrich, C. (2017). The community college penalty? Examining the bachelor's completion rates of community college transfer students as a function of time. *Community College Review*, 45(1), 3–32.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552116674550>
- Osam, E. K., Bergman, M., & Cumberland, D. M. (2017). An integrative literature review on the barriers impacting adult learners' return to college. *Adult Learning*, 28(2), 54–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159516658013>
- Perea, B. (2020). Using smaller credentials to build flexible degree completion and career pathways. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 2020(189), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20395>

- Rabla, H. A. (2017). A qualitative investigation of the factors affecting Arab international students' persistence in the United States. *College Student Journal*, 51(3), 347–354.
- Roksa, J., & Kinsley, P. (2019). The role of family support in facilitating academic success of low-income students. *Research in Higher Education*, 60(4), 415–436.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9517-z>
- Schoon, I., & Cook, R. (2021). Can individual agency compensate for background disadvantage? Predicting tertiary educational attainment among males and females. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 50(3), 408–422. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01290-2>
- Shields, K. A., & O'Dwyer, L. M. (2017). Remedial education and completing college: Exploring differences by credential and institutional level. *Journal of Higher Education*, 88(1), 85–109.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.1243943>

- Terriquez, V. (2015). Dreams delayed: Barriers to degree completion among undocumented community college students. *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*, 41(8), 1302–1323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.968534>
- Thomsen, J.-P. (2022). The social class gap in bachelor's and master's completion: University dropout in times of educational expansion. *Higher Education (00181560)*, 83(5), 1021–1038. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00726-3>
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125.
- Tolliver III, D. V., & Miller, M. T. (2018). Graduation 101: critical strategies for African American men college completion. *Education*, 138(4), 301–308.
- Turk, J. M., & González Canché, M. S. (2019). On-campus housing's impact on degree completion and upward transfer in the community college sector: A comprehensive quasi-experimental analysis. *Journal of Higher Education*, 90(2), 244–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1487755>
- Xu, Y. (2017). Localizing college retention efforts: The distance between theoretical orientation and institution-specific needs. *Innovative Higher Education*, 42(1), 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-016-9364-9>

Thank You
Questions?