

Why Students Leave Southern Utah University

May 5, 2000

Office of Institutional Research
(Revised with subgroup analysis)

After applying, enrolling, finding housing, and paying tuition and fees, why do students leave SUU? The University's ad hoc assessment committee recommended that withdrawing or non-returning students be regularly surveyed to find the answer. This element became part of the University's assessment plan in 1999.

In March 2000, 606 degree-seeking students enrolled Fall semester 1999 but not Spring semester 2000 were surveyed by mail using ACT's short-form instrument developed for withdrawing or non-returning students. The survey was supplemented with eight locally developed questions. To achieve a total response rate of 20%, six students were contacted by telephone to complete the survey. The pool of 606 included 201 freshmen, 68 transfer students, and 301 students of other academic classes. Table 1 provides a response summary.

Table 1
Summary of Survey Responses

	Freshmen	Other	Transfer	Total
Number of surveys sent	201	337	68	606
No. indicating they were graduating				(14)
Number undeliverable	(2)	(8)	(3)	(13)
Net survey population	199	329	65	579
Number of survey completions	37	67	16	120
Percent of the net completed	18.8%	20.8%	24.7%	20.7%
Number of respondents indicating they are serving missions	17	3	1	21
Percent net population serving missions	8.7%	0.7%	1.7%	7.6%
Percent of respondents serving missions	45.9%	4.5%	6.3%	17.5%

Students who responded to the survey were mainly young (84.3% under 25), female (68.4%), single (70.2%), enrolled full-time (99.1%) and in either their freshman year (31.6%) or senior year (25.4%). Only 19.3% were sophomores and 15.8% juniors. Nationally, 36.3% are freshmen, 21.5% sophomores, 9.5% juniors and 5.9% seniors.

The large number of seniors may be attributed to a number of factors: a high rate of response among seniors due to their commitment to the institution, a high number of seniors in the survey population when compared to other classes, a large number of stop-outs in this particular senior class, or a desire among some seniors to transfer to another university perceived to be more prestigious for a diploma. These factors have been discussed with ACT staff and highlights are summarized in the following subgroup analysis.

Among seniors, the top reasons for withdrawing were that they had learned all they wanted to learn at this time and/or they accepted a full-time job. The distribution of reasons for withdrawing was widely spread among seniors. The top reason for withdrawing drew 21.2% of senior responses. Of the four classes, however, seniors had several unusual responses: felt alone or isolated (7%), wanted a major not offered at SUU (7%), or were dissatisfied with the social life at SUU (7%).

Among juniors, the top reasons for withdrawing were that they had decided to attend a different college, marital status changed educational plans, and/or they wanted to move to a new location. It is, however, with the juniors that academic reasons register highest as reasons for withdrawing: disappointed with the quality of instruction at SUU (22.2%), courses were not challenging (16.7%), and desired major was offered, but course content was unsatisfactory (16.7%). Further, among the questions asked locally, juniors expressed the greatest levels of general dissatisfaction: How did enrollment at SUU meet your expectations? 27.8% responded worse than expected. How did pre-enrollment activities help you adjust? 27.8% worse than expected.

Among sophomores, the top reasons for leaving are the top institutional reasons: wanting to move to a new location (40.9%), decided to attend another college (36.4%) or desired major was not offered at SUU (27.3%). These were the same top three reasons among unmarried students. Sophomores, however, were more inclined to be dissatisfied with advisement (31.8%). Comparing responses of junior and senior students with married students found differences with the national norm and further explain why some students in upper classes are withdrawing. Among married students, the top reason for withdrawing was acceptance of a full-time job (21.2%). Second was wanting to move to a new location (15.2%). Two anecdotal factors may affect the findings on some juniors and seniors. First, returning missionaries who marry are one to two years behind their wives' academic progress. In some cases, wives may graduate and get employment in a new location while the husband continues his education. In a number of these cases, the husband may have 60 or more credits, particularly through language exams, but not have enough hours in the major field to graduate. This factor may help explain reasons for withdrawing among some married students. A second factor is two-plus programs that have no major at SUU, such as engineering. Students in these programs may have completed even three years of education, but have to transfer to complete their degree programs.

According to the survey results among all students, major reasons for leaving are neither academic nor institutional. When asked to rate each of 48 items as a major reason for leaving, students indicated they mainly left because they decided to attend a different college or they wanted to move to (or were transferred to) a new location. Both are personal reasons.

Respondents indicated that the following were major reasons for not returning. The responses are ordered by means and the percent agreeing is listed in parentheses.

1. Decided to attend a different college (21.7%)
2. Wanted to move to (or was transferred to) a new location (21.7%)
3. Marital situation changed my educational plans (11.7%)
4. Health-related problem (family or personal) (10.8%)
5. Desired major was not offered by this college (10.8%)
6. Accepted a full-time job (10.8%)

Deciding to attend a different college or wanting to move to a new location were the top responses for 43.4% of students responding to the survey.

At national public colleges, the major reasons for leaving an institution are as follows:

1. Conflict between demands of job and college (18.2%)
2. Decided to attend a different college (16.7%)
3. Health-related problem (family or personal) (16.0%)
4. Accepted a full-time job (13.7%)
5. Family responsibilities were too great (11.7%)
6. Want to move to (or was transferred to) a new location (10.9%)

Nationally, deciding to attend a different college or wanting to move to a new location were the top responses for 27.6% of students responding to the survey.

Respondents were less likely to mention academic reputation, inadequate study habits, courses were too difficult, feelings of ethnic or racial tension, commuting distance, availability of child care, or size as main reasons for leaving. In fact, some reasons were not selected by any student as a main reason for leaving: transportation difficulties, uncertainty about the value of college, housing, college rules and regulations, and inadequate facilities for the physically handicapped.

About 21.9% of the respondents planned to return to SUU; nationally, 43.3% of respondents plan to return.

It should be noted that the national data are not necessarily reflective of the “average” institution nationally. Rather it is a grouping of data from institutions of all types—private and public, community colleges to research institutions. Reviewing the list of institutions in the data set reveals that 45.7% are located in the mid-west and 22.7% are in the south. Only 14.5% are in the

west.

To this point in the analysis, what do the results mean for SUU?

- Students are generally withdrawing for personal reasons—not so much academic, institutional, financial or employment.
- The top reasons SUU students are giving for withdrawing are 15.8 percentage points higher than nationally normed standards for the same reasons.
- Most students do not intend to re-enroll.
- Helping students better understand the major fields of study offered at SUU might reduce some misplaced expectations.
- Class-specific reasons for withdrawal may be more helpful institutionally than reasons given for the entire population.

The eight local questions, developed in consultation with student services staff, sought to narrow reasons for leaving to SUU's experience. A ninth item was open for comments that are attached to this report. The results of the eight local questions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Responses to Eight Local Questions

How did your enrollment at SUU meet your expectations?	Worse than Expected 7.5%	About what was Expected 59.2%	Better than Expected 29.2%	
How satisfied were you with academic advising you received?	Worse than Expected 20.8%	About what was Expected 45.0%	Better than Expected 30.0%	
How did pre-enrollment activities help you adjust to college?	Worse than Expected 11.7%	About what was Expected 62.5%	Better than Expected 16.7%	
Did you withdraw to go on a church mission?	Yes 17.5%	No 72.5%	Not applicable 8.3%	
How prepared were you to be successful in college?	Not well prepared 9.2%	Well prepared 62.5%	Better prepared than expected 24.2%	
On average what were your grades at SUU?	A's and B's 65.8%	B's and C's 20.8%	C's & D's 2.5%	D's and F's
Were you able to find part-time work in the community?	Yes 54.2%	No—a major reason to leave 10.8%	No—a minor reason to leave 7.5%	No—but not a reason to leave 20.8%
Were you able to register for classes without conflicts?	Yes 60.8%	No 31.7%		

Although these findings show that students leave SUU for a variety of reasons, most of the main reasons may be beyond the control of the University. In addition, many former students believe they are not likely to return to the University at some future time. Despite this, these are areas where the University could take some action that might lead to an improved position with withdrawing or non-returning students and might improve student retention. These areas include:

1. Adding an entry on the admissions form that asks if a student plans to “stop-out” for volunteer service for church, state or nation. The exact wording should be developed with the admissions office. If answered affirmatively, data on the person should be excluded from the retention and other statistical data bases.
2. Advisement, both academic and non-academic, drew a few comments from students, but overall pre-admissions activities, student success efforts, and the general experience at SUU met student expectations, and grades reflected an ability to do college-level work.
3. Employment on- or off-campus—or the lack of it--appeared to be a minor factor, but that should not deter the campus from continuing to seek employment opportunities for students.
4. Discussions about class-specific interpretations of the data would be helpful to tailor student and academic services for students.