

Withdrawal from College

An Inquiry into Withdrawal from College
A study conducted at Trinity College Dublin
by
The Research Team,
Student Counselling Service

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Executive Summary

The aim of this study was to identify the factors associated with withdrawal from Trinity College Dublin. The study was funded by the Higher Education Authority and conducted by staff of the Student Counselling Service. The population under study consisted of students who withdrew from degree courses during the 2000–2001 academic year.

Pilot and full studies were conducted. The pilot study commenced in February of 2001 and included surveys with tutors and in-depth interviews with students who had left College. The full study commenced in July of 2001 and entailed analysis of student records data for demographic trends, as well as a telephone survey with students who had withdrawn from College. After 775 phone calls were made to 688 students, a sample of 133 completed surveys was analysed, for a response rate of 20%.

Key Findings

Both tutors and students made the point that there are times when withdrawing from College is in a student's best interest. Tutors and students identified the issues of *course choice/compatibility* and *commitment* as having the strongest influence on student attrition. The importance of course choice was found to decline as students progress through their degree, but remained significant. Students in the middle years of their degrees reported that stress, insufficient academic progress, and wanting a break from education were important factors in their decision to withdraw. Final year students were more likely to report trouble balancing work and study, getting behind in assignments and financial difficulties. The most cited reason for withdrawal in both closed- and open-ended questions was a lack of commitment to the course.

How students chose their course:

Almost half of the surveyed students (46%) stated they chose their course out of personal interest. Relatively few (13%) reported consulting with a professional (school guidance or private career counsellor). Eleven percent reported conducting active research on their own. Smaller percentages of students reported that families and friends influenced their choice or that they had made a rushed, uninformed decision. Nine percent of surveyed students reported that they had simply gotten their "fall-back option"; however, most students who withdrew during this 2000-2001 year were on courses that were their first or second preference.

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Patterns of withdrawal:

Three patterns of withdrawal were identified which point to three key points during the year. First were students who recognised quite early on a mismatch between themselves and their course. These students withdrew before the 2nd registration point in Hilary term. Second were students who persisted beyond this but withdrew before end of year exams. The third pattern consisted of students who failed exams but decided to withdraw rather than sit repeats. The first pattern was made up of predominantly first year students while the other two patterns consisted of students from all years. Thus, the first term and first year of College with all the demands for adjustment, the pressures associated with preparing for exams, and the experience of not passing exams offer opportunities for intervention to improve course completion.

Who students consulted with:

Many students (41% of those surveyed) reported that they did not consult with anyone in College about their decision to leave. Of those who did seek consultation, the majority went to their tutors. Smaller numbers discussed their decision with other academic or student service staff members, or sought advice from both their tutor and another staff member. The majority of students reported that they also consulted people outside College, most often family and friends.

What students are doing now:

Most of the students surveyed were either working, waiting to start courses, or already back in third level education. The majority of the sample stated that they intend to return to 3rd level. Only 10% stated that they had no such intention. Approximately one-quarter stated that they intend to return to Trinity College.

Interventions suggested by students:

Students made several suggestions about what College and students could do to address the problem of non-completion. They proposed that College provide more individualised support and advice, more flexibility in terms of course procedures and regulations, and more financial support. Many of the practices already in place for students seemed unknown to this sample of students. They stated that as students, they themselves could have prioritised their course, prepared better for choosing a course, sought assistance when needed, and avoided developing physical and/or mental health problems.

How students feel about their decision:

Two-thirds of the former students reported they were happy with their decision to leave College. One-fifth were ambivalent about their decision, and a smaller group reported regretting their decision. Students who left earlier in their course and reported experiencing less conflict between the demands of work and study were more likely to be happy with their decision.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The development of a system designed to facilitate the collection and maintenance of accurate data on student progression.
2. The development of an efficient system of identifying students at risk of withdrawing and providing the necessary support to them.
3. The provision of course prospectus in a format that is accessible to second level students and ensures an awareness of course requirements and necessary pre-requisite skills and knowledge.
4. A review of the current school liaison activities.
5. A review of the College policy on internal and external transfers.
6. The provision of accessible information and support for students.
7. A clearly defined exit procedure.
8. The need for a College policy statement which clearly states aims and objectives in terms of retention, including which types of attrition to target.

1. Introduction to the study

The retention of students in third level education has become an issue of national concern. A recent report published by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) indicated that on average, 16.8% of students who enter a course of study in a third level institution do not complete that course (Morgan, Flanagan, & Kellaghan, 2001). While this statistic places Ireland second highest in terms of 'survival rate' among OECD nations, it represents a substantial loss of both financial and human resources. In addition, for many students the decision to leave an institution of higher education is an emotionally painful and difficult one that can result in lower aspirations and diminished self-esteem (Astin, 1975; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

This report summarises the findings from an inquiry into the factors associated with non-completion at Trinity College, Dublin. The attrition rate from College in the HEA report cited above was just below the national average at 16.2% (Morgan, *et al.*, 2001). The study was funded by the HEA under its Targeted Initiatives Scheme as part of a national strategy to increase retention of third level students. The study consisted of 2 phases. First, a pilot study was conducted in order to clarify the contextual and methodological issues unique to studying attrition at College. The study proper commenced following presentation of the pilot findings to, and consultation with, the HEA network on retention. The methodology of the pilot and full study will be presented in part 3 of this report. Part 4 will report the findings of the study. Finally, parts 5, 6 and 7 will discuss the limitations of the study, implications of the findings and present recommendations for strengthening retention and successful course completion at College. After a brief conclusion, references are listed.

2. Previous research into non-completion

Studies conducted in the United Kingdom and United States dominate the retention literature. It is therefore important to consider the assumptions and context in which these studies are based before applying their findings to Irish university students.

Previous research in the United States emphasised the importance of student academic and social integration to course completion (Tinto, 1987; 1993). Student integration has been linked to the ability to cope with stress (Brack, Gay, & Matheny, 1993; Earwaker, 1992) and form relationships within the university community (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Lopez, 1997; Perrine, 1998). In the United Kingdom, commitment to one's course and one's university have been found to be predictive of success in college (Fisher, 1989; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Yorke, 1997). Further, Smith and Naylor (2001) found that prior educational preparedness and success, age, length of course, economic conditions, and perceived teaching quality significantly influenced retention in the UK.

Withdrawal may be attributed to different factors at different times of the academic year and at different points in the progression to degree. For example, the research findings of Attinsai (1989) and Tinto & Goodsell (1994) suggest that while social integration into college is crucial at the outset of the year (particularly for students living away from home), academic integration is a more important

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determinant of persistence later in the year. The first 7 weeks of term is a critical period for first year students as they struggle with coming to terms with their new social environment (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). Mackie (1998) acknowledged the complexity of factors underlying withdrawal from university during the first year and the role of students' perceptions about events and experiences. Several researchers have noted the reluctance of first year students to seek help when having difficulty. (Johnston, 1997; Rickinson, 1998).

The level of integration may be less important for students who withdraw during later years. For these students, the quality of their educational experience seems to be an important determinant of leaving (Neumann & Finlay-Neumann, 1989). Economic factors may also influence commitment as students progress with their studies (Mohr, Eiche, & Sedlacek, 1998; Smith & Naylor, 2001).

The most significant predictor of leaving a university has consistently been course choice; that is, the course did not suit the student or, conversely, the student did not fit the course (Aldridge & Rowley, 2001; Yorke, 1997). Ozga and Sukhnandan (1997) constructed a model of departure from university that stressed the importance of compatibility of institutional and course choice and preparedness for the kind of work required to succeed in a university setting. Their model has been criticised for oversimplifying the complexity of withdrawal and not attending adequately to the multitude of interactions between an individual student and an institution (Yorke, 1999).

In Ireland, research applying Tinto's model of social and academic integration has found that "field of study" may have a significant impact on academic integration to College. Term residence may influence both academic and social integration, as students who live in the family home appear to be less involved in college activities and to study less than their peers who live away from home (Somers, 1992). Recent research has linked CAO points to non-completion, with students having lower points on the Leaving Certificate being more likely to withdraw from their courses (Healy, Carpenter, & Lynch, 1999; Morgan et al., 2001). However, Trinity students were an exception to this finding in that students with the highest points were slightly more likely to withdraw than their peers with leaving certificate points in the medium range. At College, 12.9% of students in the 'high points' category did not complete their studies in comparison to 11.8% of students in the 'medium points' category (Morgan et al., 2001).

The perceived quality of both the institution and the interaction between students and staff have also been found to influence students' levels of satisfaction and commitment to course completion (Healy, Carpenter, & Lynch, 1999). Harrington, O'Donoghue, Gallagher, & Fitzmaurice (2001) found that half of Irish first year students in Trinity College during the 2000/2001 academic year reported that they had considered withdrawing. Students who reported that they had considered leaving College were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their own academic work, as well as a perception that lecturers were not approachable. Dissatisfaction with course was also linked to a reported lack of preparedness for the kind of study needed to succeed in university. Bates (2002) found a link between a perceived lack of interaction between students and staff and dissatisfaction with the institution. In

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addition, students who reported working more than 20 hours per week reported lower levels of satisfaction.

The present study is part of a series of inquiries into the factors associated with course non-completion at College. Taking into account previous research, the study focused on issues related to academic and social integration, course choice and commitment, and students' perceptions of their interactions with the College community.

3. Method of study

3.1 An initial look at withdrawal from College

A pilot study was conducted during the Hilary term, 2001. A systemic approach was taken in designing the methodology of the pilot study. As this was an initial exploration into withdrawal at College, the research team wanted to understand the issue from the perspectives of both the staff and the students. To that end, before students were contacted, an email was sent to all tutors in College asking them to state the reasons they believed students withdrew from College. Tutors were also asked what they thought College could do about non-completion. Student services staff were consulted about their perceptions of non-completion. Their responses, along with the tutors' responses and findings from the literature review, were used to construct an interview schedule and select quantitative measures for use in the pilot.

A list of students with registration status of 'withdrawn' was obtained from the Student Records Office. The list included approximately 800 students. A small sample of 60 students was selected for the pilot, stratified according to the results of the HEA report (Morgan, *et al.*, 2001). Sixty students were contacted and asked to participate in the study. The tutors of the students who agreed to come for interview were mailed a brief questionnaire aimed at finding out if the tutor knew the student had withdrawn and ascertaining if the tutor understood the circumstances surrounding the withdrawal.

3.2 Method of Full Study

Data were requested from Student Records on all students who withdrew during the 2000/2001 academic year. The data were received on two groups of students: those who engaged in some kind of active process of withdrawing, and those who withdrew by not registering for College at key dates during the year. The following data were requested on these students: name, College identification number, gender, year in College, course, tutor's name, country of origin, Leaving Certificate points and CAO preferences. In addition, information was requested as to whether or not the student was registered as a mature student or received a grant. Evening students in degree programs were included in the datasets. A further study will investigate the relationship between performance at College and withdrawal. Student records data were analysed for trends only.

After conducting the pilot study and a literature review, it was decided that a semi-structured phone interview would be the best method of data collection. Individual interviews, which were used for the pilot study, were not chosen due to the time commitment involved, difficulties in recruitment, and the high rate of non-attendance at scheduled interviews. Phone interview was selected over mailed surveys because the method allowed interaction between interviewer and participant (for clarification of responses) and, it was hoped, would ensure a higher response rate. The instrument used by Yorke (1999) and his research team in the UK was selected for use because its usefulness and validity had been previously demonstrated and because it would allow for some comparisons of the findings with other universities. The

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instrument was modified in that some additional items were added based on the pilot findings. The instrument allowed the research team to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from students who had withdrawn. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Each section of qualitative data was analysed by at least 2 members of the research team working independently and then reconciling any differences in findings.

A proportional stratified (by faculty) sample of 300 students was selected from the student records data. However, the team encountered a difficulty reaching students by phone (110 had either no phone number listed with student records, or the number was no longer in service). Therefore, a different approach to data collection was necessary. The team decided to attempt to contact all students who were listed as having withdrawn from full-time, degree courses, with the goal of obtaining 150 completed surveys. Students enrolled in evening degree courses were included. Originally the team made phone calls during the evening hours and on Saturdays. Subsequently, in response to requests from families and students, the team made calls during the day. Ongoing estimates of the representation of genders and faculties were kept. In total, approximately 775 phone calls were made from early July to late September, 2001. These calls resulted in 149 completed surveys. When the data were cleaned, 16 surveys were excluded from analysis due to the participant having never attended College, reporting having graduated from their course, or the survey being incomplete. The exclusion of these surveys resulted in 133 surveys being used in the analysis, for a response rate of 20%.

The findings of this study cannot be directly compared to the work of Morgan et al. (2001) for several reasons. Most importantly, Morgan's study investigated non-completion among one cohort of students, that is, students who entered as first years in 1992 and did or did not complete their original course by 1998. The current study is a snapshot of withdrawal during the 2000-2001 academic year and includes participants of all years, some of whom had already changed courses and/or left College and returned. The current study also included students from evening degree programs. Therefore, the two studies represent two different ways of investigating withdrawal from College. Advantages of the current study are that it describes students' reasons for leaving College, includes students at varying stages of advancement, and allows students to express what they think would have helped them complete their course.

4. Findings

4.1 Pilot findings

4.1a Data from Tutor Surveys

Emails were sent to all 102 tutors in College. Twenty replied, for a response rate of 15%. Tutors listed the following general reasons for student withdrawal: personal reasons, course unsuitability, student unsuitability, difficulty adjusting to 3rd level, financial reasons, family problems, pressure to attend 3rd level, poor preparation at 2nd level, pursuing other interests/career opportunities, health issues, poor motivation, addiction, and other/external circumstances.

Tutors suggested the following strategies for improving retention: extend the support services available to students (e.g., smaller tutorial chambers), expand existing counselling services, facilitate transfers/reapplying, address financial issues, expand provision of career guidance at 2nd level, keep in touch with students 'off-books', and other (e.g., first year interventions). Tutors also stated that there was nothing to be done in some situations, for instance when remaining in College was not the best solution for a student.

A smaller group (n = 36) of tutors were contacted about 50 students in their chambers who had withdrawn. Twenty replies were received. In the majority of cases (81%), the tutors knew that students had withdrawn. For 15 of the students, tutors were able to provide reasons for the withdrawal. The reasons tutors reported were:

- Course unsuitability (n = 6): Responses in this category related to students' inappropriate choice of study and included difficulties with course content.
- Health problems (n = 3): Responses related to student non-completion on the basis of physical or mental health problems, such as depression.
- Personal problems (n = 2): Reasons given included personal distress such as experiencing a bereavement or difficulties in the family home.
- Financial difficulties (n = 2): Lack of funds forced students to undertake part-time work and balancing work and study caused difficulties in persevering with studies.
- Difficulties adjusting to 3rd level (n = 2): Responses included in this category related to difficulty settling in and difficulties in the transition from second level to higher education.

4.1b Data from Student Interviews

Eleven students came to the Student Counselling Service for in-depth interviews and quantitative assessment of their coping strengths and weaknesses and ease of forming relationships. Only five of these students actually reported having withdrawn from College. The others believed themselves to be off-books, etc, which highlights a very common problem in researching withdrawal. The records maintained by institutions are not usually used for the purposes of tracking and researching student departure (Johnston, 1997; Ozga & Sukhmandan, 1997; Tinto, 1987; Yorke, 1999).

The findings from the pilot indicated that withdrawn students did perceive themselves as less capable of coping with stress than the average student. They reported experiencing difficult personal and family situations that contributed to their decisions to withdraw from College. The majority of them stated that they realised early on that they had chosen the wrong course.

The responses of the participants who had withdrawn indicated the following pattern in their decision-making process:

- Initial feelings that the course was not the right choice: Students cited difficulties in course content or not seeing the value of the course in terms of long-term career goals.
- By the end of the first term, with the onset of exams and assessment deadlines, students were clearer in their decision to withdraw from the course and began to consider alternatives.
- Students initially talked with peers about their decision to withdraw. Students primarily sought advice from their friends, boyfriends/girlfriends and in several cases sought advice from parents and family members.
- Students experiencing personal difficulties consulted student services (health and counselling).
- The majority of students talked with their tutor to find out their various options, e.g. to transfer or defer instead of withdrawing. Some simply informed their tutor once the decision had been made, rather than consulting prior to making the decision. In several cases, students talked to heads of departments about specific alternatives (e.g., transferring/deferral).
- 4 of the 5 students had either returned to third level education or stated that they had plans to return.
- All of the students reported that they believed their decision to leave College had been in their best interest.

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4.2 Findings of full study

4.2a Findings from student records data

Data were supplied by the Student Records office and Information Systems Services staff. Two datasets were provided. The total number of students recorded as withdrawn in these two datasets was 1194. However, after reviewing the data for one-term, one-year students, students from non-EU states and duplicates, the number of students who withdrew from degree courses at College was determined to be 688. Twenty-one of those 688 stated, when contacted, that they were not in fact withdrawn, but had graduated, were off-books, or had deferred. This points to the difficulties inherent to research into attrition and to the need to ensure accuracy of figures in order to avoid over-reporting. The tables below provide an overview of demographic data for students who withdrew from College during the 2000-2001 academic year.

Table 1 Number of students who withdrew in each faculty

Faculty	Students Who Withdrew
Arts – Letters	33
Arts – Humanities	94
Engineering*	204
Science	120
Health Science	70
BESS	46
Multifaculty	121
Total	688

*This figure includes evening students in computer science.

Table 2 Standing of students who withdrew

Standing	Students Who Withdrew
1 st Year	262
2 nd Year	224
3 rd Year	72
4 th Year	122
5 th Year	5
6 th Year	3
Total	688

Table 3 Gender of Withdrawn Students

Gender	Number of Students
Male	329
Female	359
Total	688

This group of students had a mean Leaving certificate score of 469 points (SD = 72). Student Records data indicated that 10 of the students who withdrew during the 2000/2001 academic year were on full maintenance grants, and 42 were registered as mature students. It is not known how many of the students who withdrew were evening students. Evening students make up approximately 3% of the total College population.

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4.2b Findings from survey data

Tables 4 and 5 below provide demographic characteristics of the surveyed students.

Table 4 Surveyed sample demographics

GENDER	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Year 1	14	27	41
Year 2	34	24	58
Year 3	9	8	17
Year 4/5	11	6	17
TOTAL	68	65	133

Table 5 Faculty representation among survey respondents by year

Year	Arts – H	Arts – L	Sciences	Health Sci.	BESS	Eng.	Multifac.
1 st	4	2	11	4	3	8	9
2 nd	10	1	10	2	3	27	5
3 rd	1	0	2	0	1	5	8
4 th /5 th	0	3	2	0	2	7	3
Total	15	6	25	6	9	47	25

N=133

Withdrawal from College: Why Students Leave

The students who participated in the survey endorsed ‘choice of course’ as the single most influential reason for leaving. There were no differences among students in different faculties for this finding. Females were more likely to report that choosing the wrong course influenced their decision to withdraw. Course choice seems to become a less important factor as students progress through courses. Table 6 (overleaf) presents the percentage in each year who endorsed survey items having a moderate to considerable influence on their decision to withdraw.

As can be seen from the table, issues related to course choice were most often endorsed by first and second year students. The percentage of students who responded that choosing the wrong course had a moderate to considerable influence on their decision to withdraw declined dramatically as students progressed, going from almost three-quarters of first-year leavers to just over one-quarter of final year leavers. More advanced students seemed to be more concerned about the relevance of their course to future goals. They were also more likely to report that difficulty balancing work and study influenced their decision to leave their course and to cite financial difficulties and the demands of employment as a factor. Students in the middle years of their courses seem more influenced by the perception that they were not making sufficient academic progress (i.e. failing exams, getting behind in assignments). One-third to one-half of the student respondents reported that the experience of stress was an influence in their decision to withdraw.

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Table 6 Reasons for Leaving: Percentages of students by year endorsing survey items

Survey Item	1st yr	2nd yr	3rd yr	4th/ 5th yr	Overall
Not committed to course	59	55	53	24	52
Chose wrong course of study	73	48	35	23	51
Course didn't meet expectations	46	47	35	28	43
Course seemed irrelevant	29	45	12	28	34
Course too difficult	37	29	35	6	29
Teaching didn't suit	41	50	35	17	41
Not enough academic support	49	29	18	18	32
Lecturers not approachable	24	29	6	24	24
Teaching quality poor	12	16	12	12	14
Workload too heavy	37	43	24	12	35
Classes too large	44	36	6	18	32
Timetable didn't suit	29	26	12	6	23
Course unorganised	12	14	18	18	14
Stress related to course	32	38	47	39	36
Study skills deficit	32	33	24	18	29
Lack of personal support – staff	32	34	12	18	29
Lack of personal support – other students	22	22	18	6	20
Difficulty making friends	17	14	18	6	14
Lack of personal support– friends/family	10	10	12	6	10
Trouble balancing work and study	17	38	18	45	39
Insufficient academic progress	32	41	41	18	35
Got behind in assignments	20	43	29	45	33
Didn't attend lectures	22	34	29	29	29
Wanted break from education	29	31	47	41	34
Better opportunity	20	21	6	18	18
Financial difficulties	7	21	12	39	18
Health problem	7	14	41	35	18
Didn't like social atmosphere	15	24	12	6	17
Accommodation problems	7	9	6	18	9
Problem with alcohol/drugs	0	2	6	12	3
Demands of employment	5	19	18	24	15
Commute too long/expensive	7	12	6	6	9
Needs of dependents	5	10	0	6	7
Didn't like Dublin	7	3	6	0	5
Afraid of victimisation	2	0	0	0	1
Homesickness	2	3	0	6	3

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Survey respondents were given the opportunity in open-ended questions to add any other issues they felt had a moderate to considerable influence on their decision to withdraw. Students' responses did not offer additional factors so much as reiterate certain factors that were most problematic for them. The reasons stated and number of students who provided each reason are reported in Table 7. (below)

Table 7 Other reasons for leaving reported by students (n=84)

ISSUE	Number of students
Course itself	25
Wanted a change/better opportunity/not ready for college	15
Mental/Physical illness	8
Not fitting in socially	8
Needed more academic support/facilitation	6
Difficulty with exams	5
Finances	3
Work pressures	3
Personal issues	3
Motivation	2
Study skills	2
Stress	2
Time pressures	1
Family problems	1

Students' Ranked Reasons for Deciding to Withdraw

In order to ensure that students were given adequate opportunity to define for themselves the *most* important factors in their decision to withdraw, they were asked to rank order their top three reasons for leaving College. In listing their reasons for leaving, students most frequently gave reasons related to the course itself (n = 153). Course choice was most often noted as the primary reason for leaving. In addition, students discussed the content and structure of courses as well as personal health problems when naming the most important factor in their decision. Course issues, personal issues, and difficulties adjusting to the College itself were frequently noted for second and third most important reasons for leaving. Tables 8, 9 and 10 present analysis of students' responses to the request to list the top 3 reasons for their decision to withdraw.

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Table 8 Number of students giving reasons for leaving related to course

Problems with the course	First reason	Second reason	Third reason
Made wrong choice	37	10	2
Course content	15	12	10
Course structure	8	12	2
Disliked course	7	11	6
Unspecified	3	0	12
Disliked lectures	0	4	2
Total	70	49	34

Table 9 Number of students giving reasons for leaving related to College

Problems with College	First reason	Second reason	Third reason
Wanted break	6	2	2
Social atmosphere	4	10	6
Lack of support	4	8	2
Exams	3	0	0
Study skills difficulties	2	2	0
Behind in work	1	2	2
Administration	1	1	0
Facilities	0	3	2
Total	21	28	14

Table 10 Number of students reporting leaving due to personal problems

Personal Problem	First reason	Second reason	Third reason
Health problem	14	0	1
Personal issues	9	13	9
Work problem	7	4	1
Financial problems	4	5	1
Stress	4	0	3
Family issues	2	1	2
Commuting	0	6	3
Total	40	29	20

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How Students Chose their Course

Prior research had alerted the research team to the importance of course compatibility for withdrawal from university, so students were asked to describe how they selected the course they began at College. The most common response given by students was that they selected the course out of personal interest and/or having enjoyed it in secondary school. This is not surprising, as analysis of CAO data demonstrated that over half of students who withdrew from College during the 2000/2001 academic year were on the course they listed as their first or second preference. The responses of students to the question “*how did you select the course that you did at College?*” are listed below.

- **61** students stated they selected the course out of personal interest in the subject or having enjoyed it in secondary school.
- **17** students reported that they had consulted with professionals (school guidance counsellor and/or private careers advisor) about their course choice.
- **15** students reported conducting active research on their own (reading material about the course, visiting the College, talking to students on the course).
- **12** reported they had gotten their “fall-back option”.
- **7** reported that they received input about their decision from family and friends.
- **7** students stated they felt they had made a rushed, uninformed decision.
- **2** students stated that their course at College was the only one of its kind in the country.
- **1** student stated that the course had “seemed suitable at the time”.
- **1** student stated that the reputation of College influenced him.
- **1** student stated that she had simply listed courses in order of points required and did much better on the Leaving Certificate than expected.

NB: Data were incomplete for 6 respondents (i.e., they stated that they choose their course “through the CAO”). Eight respondents reported using more than one strategy in selecting a course.

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Student Expectations and Withdrawal

Students were asked about the degree to which College met their expectations of third-level education. Approximately half (51%) of students surveyed said that it did. The other half were divided into one group of students who stated that College did not meet their expectations (26%) and another who felt that aspects of the institution did while others did not (23%). Students commented on aspects of Trinity such as its size and “image” when discussing their expectations. They also discussed issues specific to the course (content, structure, organisation of courses). Students often stated that they liked the social atmosphere, but not the academic setting, or vice versa. The statements below typify the opinions expressed by students.

Did Trinity meet the expectations you had about college?

“In some ways it did, in some ways it didn’t. I wasn’t being pushed as much to study and to work. I needed motivation.” (2nd year male student in Natural Science).

“No. I found it hard to settle in. And yes, it’s a great college with great facilities.” (2nd year female student in Engineering).

“Yes it did - but in a course that wasn't right for me. But socially and intellectually it did. I want to return.” (2nd year male in Natural Science).

“No. I found TCD very unfriendly. I felt isolated and did not get much help in the academic sense...also found TCD old fashioned” (1st year female student in BESS).

Evening students in particular responded that they could not answer this question as “you don’t really get to participate in college life.”

Timing of Withdrawal

The research team was also interested in the timing of student withdrawal. Students were asked an open-ended question about when they decided to leave College. Qualitative analysis of their responses revealed four patterns of departure. The first pattern described the timing of withdrawal for 54 students, who seemed to have an immediate recognition of a mismatch between themselves and their course. These students reported persisting for at least part of Michaelmas term but withdrawing before the 2nd registration during Hilary term. Thirty-two of the 54 were 1st year students.

The second pattern of leaving described 36 students who reported they considered leaving, but re-registered at 2nd registration and then left during Hilary or Trinity terms. These students were more likely to be in their 2nd or 3rd year. Forty-one students who failed the end of year exams and choose to withdraw rather than sit repeats made up a third category. These students were more likely to be in their 2nd, 3rd or 4th year. A fourth category consisted of two students who reported experiencing ongoing personal problems that interfered with their progression through college to the degree that they decided to withdraw. Table 11 provides a timeline of withdrawals through the year.

Withdrawal from College

Table 11 Time of decision to withdraw (n = 131)*

Time of year	October (beginning of term)	Nov/ Dec	January (before 2 nd registration)	Feb	Mar/April (before exams)	May/June (after exams)	Aug/Sep (after repeats)
Number	9	32	13	10	26	29	12
	54			36		41	

* Two students reported withdrawing after a series of efforts to manage personal problems by deferring or going off books and then coming back. However, both eventually decided that withdrawal was in their best interest.

Thinking about Leaving: Whom do students talk to?

Students were asked about whom they consulted for advice before making the decision to withdraw. When asked if they consulted anyone at College about their decision, 79 (59%) said they did, and 54 (41%) said they did not. Not surprisingly, students most frequently named their tutors as a source of advice, followed by tutors in combination with another student services staff (i.e., counsellor, GP) or academic staff (i.e., lecturer, course coordinator). Table 12 below illustrates the College personnel to which students went for advice about withdrawing.

Table 12 Sources of Advice within College

Source of Advice	Percentage of students
No one	41
Tutor	30
Academic dept. staff	7
Student service staff	6
Other	1
Tutor and student service/other academic staff	15
TOTAL	100

Students were also asked to indicate whether they had sought advice from anyone outside College. One hundred (75%) indicated that they had, and 33 (25%) indicated that they had not. Students named friends and family as the most frequently consulted sources of advice outside College. Table 13 below indicates the number and percentage of students accessing various sources of support and guidance external to College.

Table 13 Sources of Advice Outside College

Source of Advice	Percentage of students
Family/friends	62
No one	25
Other (e.g. health professional)	6
School guidance counsellor	5
Employer/work colleagues	2
TOTAL	100

Withdrawal from College

Where are they now? Where do they want to be?

Former students were also asked what they were doing at the time of the survey. Their responses are listed below in order of prevalence.

- 80 students (60%) reported that they were working. 81% of these stated that they had full-time jobs.
- 16 (12%) reported that they were enrolled in third level education
- 13 (10%) were waiting to start 3rd level courses
- 11 (8%) reported that they were working *and* studying
- 7 (5%) reported being engaged in vocational training
- 3 (2%) reported that they were unemployed
- 1 (1%) stated he had been travelling
- 1 student (1%) stated that she was repeating the Leaving Certificate, and
- 1 student (1%) stated that he was retired.

Students were also asked about their aspirations for further education. Most reported that they either intended to return to 3rd level or already had (see below). Tables 14, 15 and 16 below present information about students' stated intentions regarding further education.

Table 14 Educational aspirations of sample

Response	Percentage
Intend to return	62
Already back in 3 rd level	28
Do not intend to return	10
TOTAL	100

Table 15 Desired courses

Type of course	Percentage
Different course	55
Same/similar course	34
No intention to return	10
Not sure	1
TOTAL	100

Withdrawal from College

Table 16 Intended place of study

Institution	Percentage
Another university	33
TCD	26
IT	14
No intention to return	10
Don't know	9
Other	8
TOTAL	100

Student's Ideas about What Would Have Helped

In an effort to gain student insight on interventions that might help students complete their courses, students were asked if there were things they, or college, could have done to help them complete their courses. In response to the query, “*Is there anything college could have done to help you complete your course?*” 43% of students proposed interventions. Their responses were grouped into four areas, which are listed below in order of the frequency with which they were suggested.

1. *Providing individualised support/advice:*

Students indicated they would have enjoyed a more communicative and supportive department, i.e., “...take a personal interest in the students”; “College could have been more approachable.”

Other suggestions included extra tuition or study skills provision, feedback on assignments/exams and the monitoring of progress.

2. *Adjusting college courses:*

Suggestions included, “more flexibility about the workload,” “timetable re-arranging” and reduction in class size.

3. *Altering college practices and regulations:*

Suggestions included internal transfers or one-year deferrals and night degree courses.

4. *Offering financial assistance:*

Students also cited the need for financial aid, such as a “scheme to spread out the costs of tuition fees” where applicable.

Many of these suggestions, for example deferral, internal transfer, financial assistance and study skills instruction, are available in College but several students in this sample seemed to be unaware of them. Students cannot avail of services if they do not know about them, and these findings point to a need to ensure students are informed of the services and options available to them.

Withdrawal from College

Students were also asked the question, “*Is there anything you could have done differently to help you complete your course?*” The majority of students (61%) stated that there was nothing they could have done to help them complete their course. The responses of the remaining students (39%) are grouped below in order of prevalence:

1. *Should have prioritised the course:*

Respondents pointed to ways they could have approached the course, e.g., more frequent lecture attendance and study and better organisation. Others would have liked to make interpersonal changes, e.g., become more motivated, more focused, less stressed. Some also suggested that they should have put study before work, persisted longer or moved to be nearer College.

2. *Could have engaged in more research/ prepared better for the course:*

Students felt they were ill-informed and unprepared for third level courses. It was suggested that College could help with this by making information more readily available (updating booklets, providing a contact name for further information, offering an on-line frequently asked questions site, etc.)

3. *Could have sought assistance:*

Students reported that had they known of or availed of services, they may have managed to remain in College.

4. *Could have avoided certain medical/psychological issues:*

Students acknowledged having problems which they did not address; e.g., “Taken my medication”, “Drank less” etc.

Outcomes of Decision to Leave College

What is the emotional outcome of the decision to withdraw for these students?

Students were asked how they felt now about their decision to withdraw from College. An initial analysis of the responses of students grouped their responses into those indicating that the student was happy with his/her decision, that the student regretted the decision, and the student had mixed or ambivalent feelings about the decision. The number of students in each group and percentage of total (n=132*) are presented in the table 17 below.

Table 17 Students’ feelings about having withdrawn

Response	Number of students	Percentage
Happy	88	66
Mixed	26	20
Regrets	18	14
TOTAL	132	100

*One student of the 133 respondents chose not to answer the question, as he maintained that he had not withdrawn but was merely taking a second year out.

Withdrawal from College

The majority of students reported being happy with their decision. Many used the phrase “the right decision for me” to describe their feelings. The key findings associated with each of these outcomes are listed below.

“Happy” (students who reported they were happy with their decision to withdraw from College)

- More likely to be female.
- More likely to be in their 1st or 2nd year.
- Less likely to report experiencing stress related to the course.
- Less likely to cite trouble balancing work and study and difficulty making friends as factors in the decision to withdraw.
- Most withdrew before 2nd registration (end of Jan) and over half sought advice within College about their decision
- More likely to feel that there was nothing themselves or College could have done to help them complete the course
- More likely to have returned or have intention to return to college (60% reported having the intention and 33% reported having already returned)

“Mixed” (students who reported some ambivalence about their decision)

- More likely to be male.
- Also more likely to be in their 1st or 2nd yr.
- Most likely to experience stress related to course (54% cited this as having moderate to considerable influence on their decision to withdraw)
- More likely to perceive staff as unsupportive.
- Most likely to report that financial difficulties influenced their decision to withdraw.
- Nearly twice as likely as “happy” to have cited trouble balancing work and study as being a moderate/considerable influence in withdrawing.
- Over one-third had failed exams but didn’t sit repeats.

Withdrawal from College

“Regrets”(students who stated they regretted their decision to withdraw)

- Genders equally represented.
- More likely to be in their 3rd or 4th yr.
- 45% cited experiencing stress related to the course as influencing their decision to withdraw.
- Most likely to cite trouble balancing work and study as a reason for withdrawal: **68% worked more than 20 hrs per week.**
- Twice as likely as “happy” and “mixed” to cite difficulty making friends as a factor for withdrawing.
- Most likely to feel that there was something College or themselves could have done to help them complete the course.
- Less likely to have intention of returning to 3rd level

5. Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to the current study. The difficulties encountered in using a system of data collection not designed for research purposes have already been noted. The timing of data collection (during the Summer months) meant that former students who were on holiday or working abroad were less likely to be surveyed. However, when students were reported to be returning to Ireland before the study was concluded, the research team attempted to contact them. Students were also contacted abroad if family members provided phone numbers. The method of the study was a time-limited, “snapshot” approach to investigating withdrawal from College. A longitudinal study tracking the progress of a cohort of students would likely provide additional insight into the many critical points during which students struggle during the process of embarking on and completing a course of study. Similarly, the inclusion of data from students who have finished their studies might offer a more complete view of the problems associated with course completion.

Because students were interviewed after the fact (i.e., several weeks to months after having made the decision to leave College), the passage of time may have had an effect on the attributions made by participants. Data collected during an exit interview might better capture the concerns and thoughts of students at the time of withdrawal. The problem inherent to research relying on self-report, i.e., the degree to which students’ statements portray the reality of their individual situations, must also be acknowledged. A further limitation is the fact that 3 of the 5 interviewers were non-Irish. When interviewers and interviewees are from different cultural backgrounds, there is more opportunity for misinterpretation on both sides. Finally, it was noted that proportionately fewer participants discussed serious personal and family problems during the phone interviews than during the in-depth interviews conducted for the pilot study. This points to the possibility that without face-to-face interaction, participants were less likely to disclose more personal or painful issues.

6. Implications for retention at College

These findings highlight the need stated by previous researchers (Tinto, 1993) for institutions to clarify what kinds of attrition to concern themselves with. It is generally recognised that an attrition rate of 0% would be neither healthy nor desirable (Yorke, 1999). It is therefore important for institutions interested in addressing retention to decide which forms of non-completion are problematic and which are the natural consequences of developmental and contextual circumstances.

The majority of the students who provided data for the survey were satisfied with their decision to leave College. Most of them intended to return to third level education, and a sizeable proportion had already done so. These students recognised early on that the course of study in which they were engaged did not match their personal and professional goals or interests. It would seem that their non-completion of the course they began at College is without substantial personal cost to them. However, it does represent administrative and financial costs to College and the HEA. In addition, there were also students in this research who reported personal regret about their non-completion and lower self-efficacy for returning to third level, a further cost in terms of human potential.

Withdrawal from College

The HEA Network on Retention has expressed the need to “deconstruct” what is meant by the terms “withdrawal,” “dropping out,” and “retention” (HEA Network meeting, 15th June 2001). If College is to develop effective retention strategies, there must be agreement on what form of non-completion to target and how best to assist students to either commit to courses here or transfer to other courses or other vocational choices.

The process of conducting this research emphasised the need for keeping accurate and user-friendly records on student progress. The office responsible for this function in College was extremely cooperative and accommodating to the research team. However, the record keeping system was difficult to use for purposes of understanding when and why students had been ‘made withdrawn’ by College, when students actually withdrew, and whether or not they intended coming back. In many cases, it seems possible that the method of data storage could lead to an over-reporting of non-completion. Again, if College is to make an institution-wide effort to assist students in completing their degrees, a system of keeping accurate and reliable information about student progress will be required.

Students’ proposed strategies to increase retention were very much in line with those made by tutors during the pilot phase of the study. Their suggestions also indicate that many students may not be aware of the assistance and strategies already in place in College. Thus there are implications for the ways in which students are informed about services and the accessibility of the service provision. Further, the finding that 41% of surveyed former students did not consult with anyone in College about their decision indicates the need for some system of tracking students in order to link those who are struggling with the appropriate service.

The importance of course choice to course completion is readily apparent in this study as well as previous research. The extent to which College can and should have an impact on this decision, (which is made before students arrive) must be considered if students are to be assisted in making more informed decisions. Efforts to increase degree completion that begin before students arrive at College are part of what has come to be called a “seamless” approach to the problem of attrition (Burr, Burr, & Novak, 1999). Such an approach involves institutional clarity and commitment to ensuring that each student has the best possible opportunity of completing the course. The following section will detail recommendations for addressing non-completion at College and ensuring that students receive the support and instruction they need in order to complete their course or make decisions about withdrawing that are in their best interest.

7. Recommendations

These recommendations are made in response to the issues raised by staff and students in Trinity College and to the experience of the research team in conducting this research. While there are many efforts underway within College to increase course completion, the following recommendations aim to further develop and standardise these strategies.

7.1 The development of a system designed to facilitate the collection and maintenance of accurate data on student progression

It is difficult if not impossible to track student progression with a system that is not designed to do so. The compilation of accurate records, in a format accessible by College staff involved in retention efforts, is an important first step toward addressing this problem. There is a committee within College working to ensure that a new system of record keeping is developed that enables College to collect and maintain accurate information about students that is protected yet up-to-date and accessible to staff concerned with student welfare and progression.

7.2 The development of an efficient system of identifying students at risk of withdrawing and providing the necessary support to them

The tracking of student progress, if aimed at increasing retention, cannot reside solely in the hands of the College administration. Individual departments can assist both their students and College by implementing a system with which to monitor student attendance, performance and progress. It is recognised that some departments are currently doing this. The responses of the students who participated in this research indicate that more could be done on a departmental level to monitor the progress, or lack thereof, of students. Each department is encouraged to undertake the development of a student-friendly early warning system that could be used to identify students struggling with integration and/or coursework, offer assistance and link them to the appropriate services.

7.3 The provision of course prospectus in a format that is accessible to secondary students and ensures an awareness of course requirements and necessary pre-requisite skills and knowledge

This information should include such details as the content and structure of the course (i.e., the number of hours spent in lecture or labs and the number of recommended hours to be spent in independent study). The tension between recruitment of students and informing them of what will be expected of them is well-documented in the literature as are the benefits to be gained in terms of course completion (Mackie, 1999; Martinez, 1997).

7.4 A review of the current school liaison activities

College presently engages in a range of school liaison activities, e.g., open days, attendance at careers conferences and links with designated second level schools. The aim of these activities is to assist students with making informed choices about their course in order to minimise subsequent withdrawal. Innovative ways of creatively engaging with students, parents, principals, and career guidance professionals need to be further developed and additional resources made available in light of the findings of this study. The finding that relatively few students consulted career guidance professionals about selecting courses indicates a further need to review the provision of this resource to secondary schools. The importance of supporting guidance counsellors and reviewing the provision of this service to students has been recommended previously (Harkin & McCarthy, 1999).

7.5 A review of the College policy on internal and external transfers

While the complexities of transferring course are acknowledged, it seems probable that a more flexible, transparent system of transferring would assist students who want to stay in College, but undertake a course other than the one they previously chose, if there are places available and the entry criteria are met. A review of the current procedure, which requires that first-year students make a decision and apply to change course within the first 2 weeks of term, could lead to greater flexibility and a corresponding increase in retention. Further, more transparent College policies on transfers, would result in students being better informed about their options. The findings of this study indicated that students are often unaware of the options open to them.

A review of the procedures of external transfers requires facilitation by the HEA, the universities and the CAO but could result in more students gaining access to preferred courses. The need for a review is indicated by the number of students in the database listed as 'withdrawn' who reported they never took up a course at College. While College does offer these vacant places to other applicants through the CAO, these findings indicate that there is the possibility that the system of record keeping does not always facilitate this.

The procedures for transferring internally and externally are not uniform in the university sector. The resulting complexities lead to difficulty and confusion when students try to transfer. This may result in some students leaving third level education. Greater transparency and perhaps, some degree of standardisation might be of benefit. This issue could be referred to the Confederation of Heads of Irish Universities and the HEA for review.

7.6 Support for students

In order for College to facilitate the social and academic integration of students, it is important that accessible information about services be available to students. The findings of this study indicate the need for existing services to review the way in which they advertise and market their services, and for College to review the level of provision that exists.

Further, reviewing and further developing the support and information about expectations and requirements early in courses would greatly ease the anxiety and stress experienced by first year students. While it is reasonable to expect college students to begin to increase their tolerance for ambiguity, it is also important to remember that many students enter College from very familiar, highly structured environments. In addition, many students come into courses lacking necessary knowledge and skills, and would benefit from the provision of extra tuition in these areas. Some courses are currently providing this extra support to students, but the provision could be extended in order to meet the needs of more students.

It is further recommended that College consider the provision of some form of the seminars for first year students that have enjoyed success in the States. These “first year experience” seminars have been shown to increase course completion and student satisfaction rates (National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina, 2001). The goal of these seminars is to provide *accessible* (to all - because compulsory) instruction in the basic skills needed to succeed in university. These seminars can also provide a structured system of support for incoming students. First-year seminars could be provided within departments or centrally. While this may at first seem counter to the idea of university students as adults responsible for their own learning, it is important to bear in mind the developmental level at which many students enter College, be they young students struggling with the transition from a highly structured secondary school setting, or mature students struggling with re-learning how to learn in an academic setting.

7.7 A clearly defined exit procedure

A clear and transparent procedure of leaving College, involving a meeting with one’s tutor, would serve several purposes. First, it would maximise use of the tutorial system and probably lead to students choosing options other than withdrawal in some instances. It would also enable students to be linked with other support services if needed. Students for whom it seems withdrawal is the best option could be assisted in leaving College in a way that does not cause them unnecessary personal or professional difficulties later in life. Another advantage of such a procedure would be ongoing data collection about who is leaving and why. There is currently a working committee in College engaged in constructing an exit procedure.

Recent discussions among noted experts (Tinto, et al.) have indicated the need to initiate outreach interventions prior to an ‘exit’ stage. Tutors could be asked to email students in their chambers at key points (e.g., first 7 weeks of term, just before exams, just after exams) in an effort to identify students who are at risk of leaving College.

7.8 The need for college to decide which kinds of attrition to target

The development of a retention policy that is congruent with the strategic plan of the institution is a critical component of an effective response to attrition. Initiatives aimed at addressing student non-completion must be made on an institutional level, with macro- and micro-level interventions, requiring the support of deans and department heads.

Many of the research team's recommendations echo those published in the proceedings from the Staying Power colloquium (Harkin & McCarthy, 1999). However, they are made in response to the issues arising from this inquiry into the experiences of students and tutors at Trinity College Dublin.

8. Conclusion

Tinto (1987) stated that education, not retention, should be goal of retention programs. Successful retention efforts recognise that there are times when a student is best served by being assisted in leaving an institution. However, the majority of students complete their degrees, and student services play a vital role in assisting students who are experiencing personal or academic difficulties. The findings of the current study indicate many opportunities for intervention aimed at increasing course completion. The existing partnership, and a greater coordination of efforts, among student support services, the administration, and the academic community will be required to address the issues unique to attrition from Trinity College Dublin.

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