

AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION INTO DEMOGRAPHIC AND
PSYCHOGRAPHIC DETERMINANTS OF CLASS DROPPING BY
MARKETING STUDENTS

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Introduction

There appears to be a growing trend in higher education toward allowing students to withdraw from a course relatively late in the term. In most cases the student can withdraw from a class without grade penalty (prior to a specific date, after which the student receives a grade penalty).

Individual professors are perhaps faced with attempting to explain why students drop his class. Department chairpersons certainly must monitor course dropping in an attempt to determine cause and retain course enrollment.

There has been surprisingly little research conducted (particularly relevant to business students) on the cause of course dropping. Matley (1982) found that course withdrawers resembled college drop-outs (in the literature) in that time of departure was related to academic standing.

Based upon research by Feather (1963A, 1966) Feather and Saville (1967) and Bandura (1977), it was predicted that students with lower GPA's would be more likely to drop courses. Support for this hypothesis was found only in the College of Arts and Sciences, which was largely reflective of the behavior of female students in that college. This is consistent with the findings of Marks (1967) and Astin (1971), who found that students who drop out of college tend to have below average GPA's.

There has been considerable research conducted to attempt to measure and explain the causes of college attrition--or why students withdraw from their college career. One could perhaps conclude that attributes of college drop-outs are similar to attributes of students who are course-droppers. Perhaps, the attributes are more firmly developed in the student who withdraws from school.

In an attempt to understand college student retention and attrition, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems recently published a manual for conducting student attrition studies (Patrick, Myers, & VanDusen, 1979), as well as a thorough review of research on the topic (Lenning, Beal & Saver, 1980).

Typically, drop-outs are operationally defined as all students in a first-time freshman class who at some later point in time are not enrolled and have not been graduated. For the purposes of this study, "class drop" will be differentiated as withdrawing from a course, but not the university, after the first week of classes.

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of class-dropping, particularly by marketing students. Specifically, the study attempts to determine student perceptions as to why they drop classes.

Methodology

Since the purpose of the study was to gain some insight as to why students withdraw from courses in college, a written questionnaire was given to 327 marketing students at a major university located southeast United States. The questionnaire contained a series of Likert statements, each of which have five levels of agreement (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). These statements were intended to discern the opinions of marketing students about certain factors which could have some effect on why they drop courses in college. The factors can be grouped into the following basic categories: (a) factors which relate to the professors and the advising of students; and (b) academic factors which are directly related to why students withdraw from courses.

Tests of significance (using the t-test) were performed on each of the Likert statements to determine if the perceptions of the group toward each statement were statistically significant. Tables 1 and 2 exhibit the Likert statements with corresponding percentages and levels of significance. The .05 level was established for significance testing. The questions were arranged in the questionnaire in random order to eliminate the chance of bias on the part of the respondents. An assumption of normally distributed, intervally scaled data was made about the respondents.

Findings

Statements which concentrate on professors and the advising of students, and the possible effects on students' withdrawing from courses are presented in Table 1. All these statements exhibit a significant difference at the .05 level.

Statement 1 showed a strong level of disagreement among students who said they drop courses because of boring professors. But then, Statement 2 showed a strong level of agreement with the statement that more interesting professors have fewer drops, and Statement 3 showed a strong level of agreement with the statement that fewer students would drop if the material was better explained. Thus, it would appear that most of these students perceive the quality of instruction and/or the ability of the instructor as having an effect on whether or not students drop courses. Also Statement 4 exhibited a strong positive level of agreement with the statement that students ask friends about a course and the professor teaching it. In addition, Statement 5 exhibited a strong level of agreement with the the statement that their college has good professors, and Statement 6 showed that most students believed that professors who are involved in consulting work usually make better teachers.

With respect to advising students, there was a strong level of agreement (in Statement 7) with the statement that more students know who their advisor is, but as shown in Statement 8, most students disagreed that they have ever talked to their advisor. This could certainly have an effect on whether or not students might withdraw from a course; i.e., if students were to talk with their advisor prior to dropping a course, they might be able to make better decisions regarding the drop.

Statements which focus on some of the academic or curricula-related factors which could influence students' decisions to withdraw from courses are presented in Table 2. All but two of these statements (14 and 15) exhibit a significant difference at the .05 level. Statement 9 showed a strong level of agreement with the statement that it is easy to drop courses without a grade penalty. Thus, it would appear that when stated the other way, these students believe a grade penalty would tend to reduce withdrawals. Then, as shown in Statement 10, students were more in disagreement with the statement that they should pay a penalty for dropping courses. Both statements may indicate that students appreciate the ease with which they are allowed to withdraw. This may be substantiated by Statement 11, which showed a very strong level of agreement with the statement that there will always be students who drop. This could mean that no matter what steps are taken, students believe that a certain amount of course withdrawals will occur.

The remaining statements in this section attempt to shed some light on the more specific academic aspects of why students drop. Statement 12 exhibited a strong level of disagreement with the fact that most people drop difficult courses. Thus, the fact that a student believes that a course is difficult is not a reason for withdrawal, according to their perception.

When analyzing this situation further, it was found that Statement 13 showed that more students said they never drop elective courses, and there was no significant difference of agreement or disagreement among the students as to whether they drop required courses (Statement 14). This would appear to be logical because a student might be more prone to withdraw from a required course than an elective if they were not doing as well as hoped. Along these same lines, Statement 15 showed no significant level of agreement or disagreement among students with respect to whether or not they often register for more courses than they need. This is interesting because had there been a significant level of agreement, this may have been a reason why more students drop classes, but such was not the case.

Statement 16 showed a strong level of agreement among students when asked if they drop courses to maintain a high grade point average. According to the literature, this is probably one of the more common reasons why many students withdraw. If a student is doing well, or if he believes he will do well in a course, he would usually be less likely to withdraw from it.

Statement 17 exhibited a significantly strong level

of agreement with the fact that most students believe that their friends drop classes to avoid probation. Thus, more students believe that when they drop classes, it is to keep a high grade point, but they believe that their friends drop to avoid probation. This might indicate that when it comes to withdrawing from college courses, most students see themselves in a more positive way than they see their friends.

Summary of Findings

While it is clear that previous research on this topic is incomplete, most academicians believe that the primary reason for course dropping is related to academic standing. In this study, students agreed that maintenance of their grade point average was an important reason for dropping. However, the marketing students also indicated that quality of instruction, academic advising, abilities of the professor and whether the course was required as significant factors in their decision to drop the class.

This information should be useful to teachers and administrators in developing strategies to reduce student withdrawals. Certainly, there is a need for further research in this area so that we can better understand and control class dropping.

TABLE 1

FACTORS RELATING TO PROFESSORS AND STUDENT ADVISING

| STATEMENTS | Level of Agreement (percentages when n = 327) | | | | | T-TEST PERCENT |
|--|---|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|----------------|
| | STRONGLY DISAGREE | DISAGREE | NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE | AGREE | STRONGLY AGREE | |
| 1. Most students drop courses because of a boring professor | 4.6 | 35.4 | 30.3 | 25.4 | 4.3 | .048 |
| 2. If the professors were more interesting, there would be fewer drops | 5.2 | 15.6 | 27.2 | 30.0 | 22.0 | .001* |
| 3. Fewer students would drop if the material were explained better. | .9 | 11.9 | 20.5 | 41.0 | 25.7 | .001* |
| 4. I ask friends about a course and about professors. | 2.8 | 9.2 | 15.2 | 46.8 | 26.0 | .001* |
| 5. My college has good professors. | 1.5 | 4.0 | 24.1 | 56.3 | 14.1 | .001* |
| 6. Professors who consult make better teachers. | 2.4 | 13.2 | 37.9 | 34.0 | 12.5 | .001* |
| 7. I know who my advisor is. | 10.4 | 19.9 | 12.2 | 29.7 | 27.8 | .001* |
| 8. I have talked to my advisor. | 22.6 | 36.1 | 13.8 | 17.4 | 10.1 | .001* |

*Significant at the .05 level

TABLE 2

ACADEMIC FACTORS RELATED TO STUDENT WITHDRAWALS FROM CLASSES

Level of Agreement (percentage when n = 327)

| STATEMENTS | STRONGLY | | NEITHER AGREE | | STRONGLY T-TEST | |
|--|----------|----------|---------------|-------|-----------------|---------|
| | DISAGREE | DISAGREE | NOR DISAGREE | AGREE | AGREE | PERCENT |
| 9. It is easy to drop courses without a grade penalty. | 4.0 | 13.2 | 23.2 | 47.4 | 12.2 | .001* |
| 10. Students should pay a fee to drop courses. | 16.5 | 32.4 | 16.2 | 23.3 | 11.6 | .006* |
| 11. There will always be students who drop. | .3 | .9 | 3.7 | 42.5 | 52.6 | .001* |
| 12. Most people drop difficult courses. | .9 | 11.9 | 15.3 | 54.4 | 17.5 | .001* |
| 13. I never drop electives. | 7.0 | 23.9 | 14.3 | 24.5 | 30.3 | .001* |
| 14. I drop required courses. | 12.2 | 14.7 | 29.3 | 34.6 | 9.2 | .069 |
| 15. I often register for more hours than needed. | 16.2 | 25.7 | 13.8 | 29.3 | 15.0 | .967 |
| 16. I drop to maintain a high grade-point average. | 4.0 | 18.7 | 21.1 | 39.4 | 16.8 | .001* |
| 17. My friends drop to avoid probation. | 3.7 | 15.9 | 41.3 | 31.8 | 7.3 | .001* |

*Significant at the .05 level