

THE COLLEGE DEPARTURE PROCESS AMONG THE ACADEMIC ELITE

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High attrition from a selective school is an especially unexpected institutional outcome: Students and schools invest significant resources to ensure a match. This study examines the departure process underlying students' decisions to leave college, based on a case study of attrition at a major selective urban American university. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews designed to identify the qualitative aspects of attrition as a process that leads to students' ultimate decisions to disenroll. The results suggest that intervention may most profitably lie in the communication and interaction networks established between students and university personnel. When working successfully, such networks can enable discussion that informs students' decisions about whether to leave or to stay. The departure process discovered at this university may possess characteristics that can inform retention policy at other institutions of higher education in both urban and nonurban settings.

Keywords: *student attrition; research universities; selective institutions*

How do students leave a selective school? That is, what is the actual departure process that underlies the decision to leave? Answering the question casts light on important patterns that inform how attrition transpires. In this article, attrition is viewed not only as an end result but also as a set of student behaviors that comprise the process leading up to departure. Understanding the systematic nature of these behaviors has the potential to inform retention policies at colleges and universities that vary in selectivity.

This article is based on a case study of a selective university: The school admits fewer than 40% of its applicants. Its 5-year graduation rate is slightly under 80%. Although the graduation rate may be high relative to the universe of postsecondary institutions, it is low compared to most other selective schools of its type—schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton (“Directory of colleges,” 1998). Thus, within its organizational niche of institutions, the university in this study performs poorly in comparison with the rest. The

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impetus for this study was the concern of university officials that this trend has endured for some time.

Although the school's identity must remain anonymous, a general outline of its characteristics can be presented to provide a descriptive overview of the type of institution under study. The institution is a traditional, private, research university offering advanced graduate and professional degrees and contains a renowned undergraduate college. Located in an urban environment, the institution has a required freshmen residency requirement, but the majority of its undergraduates live in campus residence halls throughout their college years. Undergraduates are admitted from a nationally competitive pool of applicants, and students arrive each year from all parts of the country. A small fraction of undergraduates come from abroad, owing in part to the institution's international reputation. Like other selective schools of its type, the institution is noted for its academic rigor and is marked by a demanding curriculum designed to provide undergraduates with a firm foundation in the liberal arts while also preparing them for advanced study and success in the professions.

As the essays in Bender's (1988) volume describe, a majority of the private selective research institutions in the United States were founded, and have increasingly assumed a niche within, urban centers. Institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Chicago, Brown, Carnegie-Mellon, New York University, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology were founded in urban centers that have only grown since these schools' founding (see also Geiger 1986, 1993). The essays partly account for the greatness that these institutions came to assume by the social, cultural, and economic vitality found in their urban settings. But such institutions also may pose special challenges of integrating the array of students they enroll from wide regions of the country and the world. Many of those who come to these social centers are unaccustomed to the mores of the urban metropolis. Geographic setting alone, therefore, lends itself to being a primary source of student-school dissonance, which may be expressed in attrition.

BACKGROUND

Leaving any college runs counter to both individual and institutional expectations. Even though both students and schools are aware of attrition's omnipresence, neither expects the student to depart before earning a degree. In selective schools, attrition may be viewed as even more unexpected. Both student and school likely invest more time and money to make a match on the

premise that such expenditure more fully ensures mutual compatibility (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). In addition, selective schools tend to be prestigious ("Directory of colleges," 1998). As a social resource, prestige possesses instrumental value in retaining students, even when the costs of leaving seemingly outweigh the benefits of staying and graduating with the degree (Goode, 1978).

Tinto (1986) has described five major theoretical perspectives on attrition: psychological, economic, societal, organizational, and interactional. As explained in *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1987), Tinto's own model of attrition is interactional. It has become among the more prominent perspectives on attrition, reflected in the focus of considerable empirical research (e.g., Braxton, Brier, & Hossler, 1988; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980). The influence of Tinto's approach is manifest, as Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) observe, by its more than 400 citations and 170 dissertations by the mid-1990s.

Tinto's (1987) interactional approach to attrition stresses its longitudinal underpinnings. According to this view, students bring to college sets of traits (e.g., race or ethnicity, gender, achievement, socioeconomic status) that influence their levels of commitment to college. The traits with which students enter and their initial college commitment in turn influence the extent to which they become integrated into a school's academic and social communities. Academic and social integration, therefore, stand as master concepts behind the theory. "Other things being equal, the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion" (Tinto, 1975, p. 96).

Although Tinto's (1987) perspective is interactional to the degree it is premised on a postulated fit between students and a college environment, the students themselves—the actual people doing the staying or leaving—are hidden from view. That is, their actions are unobserved and their voices are unheard. This has also been the case with the other major theoretical perspectives—psychological, economic, societal, and organizational. Students' traits, whether social, psychological, or economic, may be postulated by these perspectives to be part of the departure equation, but students—their perspectives and accounts about leaving—have received much less attention. This is evidenced by attrition work, which is heavily quantitative, as documented in the studies that have codified the major empirical inquiries on attrition (Braxton et al., 1997; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980).

Tinto's theory (1987) asserts that interaction between the student and college environment is consequential, but how such interaction transpires has

not been ascertained for students who leave. What is the character of interactions for students who have embarked, knowingly or not, on the road to attrition from their schools? With whom do they interact and with what frequency? What is the content of these interactions? By seeking a view from the inside, administrators can likely gain an understanding about how attrition works, indicating the ways students interact with, experience, and come to perceive the institution in which attrition occurs. Thus, we may profit from a more grounded view of attrition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Such a view emphasizes a "student-centered" approach to understanding college departure (Stage & Hossler, 2000).

Integral to the student-centered view is the concept of human agency—people exercising control over their actions. As Bandura (1997) explains, "based on their understanding of what is within the power of humans to do and based on their own capabilities, people try to generate courses of action to suit given purposes" (p. 3). But without actually going to the students who experience attrition, researchers and policy makers know neither the students' purposes nor how students and their interactions with the college environment result in college departure.

Academic and social integration into college communities are a function of interaction between students and others at an institution, including faculty, advisers, residential staff, and other students. Researchers have noted the strong impact on persistence exerted by interaction with faculty in particular. Frequent contact with faculty outside of the classroom has been found to be one of the most important variables behind persistence (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). In recent work, Light (2001) has found that establishing a personal-professional tie with at least one faculty member is the single most important action students can take to ensure persistence, as well as other positive intellectual outcomes both in and after college. Thus, following Tinto's (1987) perspective, if interaction is the foundation on which academic and social integration gets built, the existence, frequency, and character of that interaction become key to understanding how and why attrition occurs.

The present study adopts a student-centered approach to viewing attrition. It focuses on students' interactions and communication patterns during the period leading up to college departure. It does so with a rationale: In systematically examining students' interaction and communication over time, attrition may be more fully elucidated as a longitudinal process—a central tenet of Tinto's general theory (1987). Finally, because the sample obtained for this study is relatively small and was gathered in a single institution, this inquiry is exploratory. It represents an initial effort for a student-centered

approach to college departure by talking with those whom attrition has most directly affected.

DESIGN AND METHOD

To understand attrition as a behavioral process occurring at the level of interaction, the study called for a qualitative depth of detail that would enable students to expound on their experience of leaving. Therefore, the study was centered on semistructured interviews.

Thirty interviews with students who had left the university were conducted in December 1997. The interviewees were all traditional age students. Twenty-nine had lived in residential dormitories at the university; 1 was a local commuter. The students—who for simplicity will be called *leavers*—were randomly selected from a population of students who had left the university between 1994 and 1997. The leaver time period was selected so that leavers could be interviewed when the experience was still relatively fresh in their minds and easier to recall in detail. A 3-year leaver time frame was used to pool a sufficient number of students to interview. Interviews were held with students who had unambiguously withdrawn—that is, those students who had no intention of ever returning. This subset of all students who leave (medical leaves; so-called stop-outs) made up the largest fraction of students leaving the university. It also is the group of students whose type of departure—leaving for good—motivates the research question: How does a prestigious college or university lose an unexpectedly high proportion of select students?

The 30 students interviewed consisted of just under 25% of people who had unambiguously withdrawn in the years sampled (1994 to 1997); the total leaver population from this 3-year span was 127 students. Thirty and not some other number of interviews were conducted because clear and consistent patterns had emerged from this sample. In other words, a saturation point had been reached, at which data began to predictably repeat themselves. Under such a condition, additional cases would add only marginal value to the corpus of information gathered (Morse, 1994).

All of the students were interviewed by the author. Following a uniform protocol, leavers were assured that their participation in the study was confidential. They were encouraged to speak candidly about their thoughts and experiences in deciding to leave. The interview questions focused on their communication and interaction patterns with other people in the university, specifically faculty, academic advisers, and residential staff, who—at least in

principle—are key players in the formation of academic and social integration of students within a college's communities. The interview protocol also included a section that asked if, when, and with what consequence students had discussed their thoughts and decisions to leave with anyone else beyond those mentioned above, such as friends and other students.

The interviews included probe questions to help ensure that respondents provided a coherent account, much as people must do in providing an internally consistent life story that conveys validity (Linde, 1993). Probe questions, in addition to the interview being defined by the researcher as an opportunity to speak frankly about students' attrition experiences, were incorporated to maximize the validity of the accounts provided by reducing incentives for respondents to offer mere rationalizations for why and how they left. Indeed, in most of the interviews, students expressed an eagerness to participate and talk about why they left the university, possibly because they had never been presented with such an opportunity when they were thinking about leaving. All of the interviews were completed by telephone; all were tape recorded, and all were transcribed for analysis.

THE DEPARTURE PROCESS

To understand how students come to decide to leave—the departure process—the group of leavers were asked about their interactions with key people in the university. These were the people whose roles are—at least in principle—directly involved in the decision to leave or to stay in college. These people include faculty, professional academic advisers (as distinct from faculty), and staff in the residential system of the school.

FACULTY

The vast majority of interviewees never sought the counsel of a faculty member about leaving. Only eight of the interviewees approached a faculty member about leaving. Of those eight, most approached only one faculty member, approached that faculty member only once, and usually for one specific reason: to get a letter of recommendation to complete transfer application materials.

The typical experience in talking to a faculty member—for the few leavers who do—is exemplified in the two cases below. (For simplicity, interview

data from students will be referred to by number, 1 through 30, to keep their accounts separate from one another.)

Student 8.

Question (Q): Back when you were thinking of leaving, did you ever talk to a faculty member about doing so?

Answer (A): It was just because I needed a letter of recommendation, and I told them that I was going to leave. I didn't know him very well, so he didn't know me, either, so he just told me that he wished me a good trip or something like that and that he hoped that I had a nice experience at [the school].

Q: Did you find talking with this faculty member helpful?

A: Not very much. I don't think so.

Q: Why not?

A: I think it was because I didn't know him well. He didn't know me well either, and it was kind of like a formal thing. It wasn't a very close relationship. I didn't know him well. He didn't know me either.

Q: What was the stance that he took toward you leaving?

A: Maybe he was in a hurry or something. I was in a hurry when I talked to him. It was briefly, for about a half a minute or so.

Q: You talked with him for 30 seconds?

A: Yes, it was so short because I was bringing the letter of recommendation for him that I needed, and that's it. That's when he told me that he hoped I had a nice year here at [at the school], and he wished me a good trip. Something like that.

Student 21.

Q: Back when you were thinking of leaving, did you ever talk to a faculty member about doing so?

A: I talked to the person who wrote me a recommendation.

Q: Can you describe that experience?

A: He didn't really try to talk me into staying or anything like that. He just said, "Well, what don't you like?" and I told him that I also had a problem with the [general education courses], which I thought was a little extensive.

Q: What did you discuss with the faculty member you spoke to?

A: I just talked to him about [the general education requirements] and the atmosphere, and he sort of agreed with me. He said, "Yes, well, it is a little extensive." He just wrote me a recommendation, basically. I mean, I didn't talk to him for long.

Q: Is there something you thought you gained in talking to a faculty member about leaving?

A: No, and my mind was pretty much made up, so I wasn't going to be changed either way. By the time I talked to someone, it was already April, because I was trying to get my application out. I didn't get that out until the end of May.

Students who had never talked with faculty about leaving were asked why they had not done so, and their responses inform an understanding about how attrition transpires.

Student 24.

Q: Why do you think that this is the case—that you've never talked to a faculty member?

A: Well, that was probably half me and half who I had as faculty. I enjoyed who my teachers were, but I guess I could say they weren't inviting to get to know them as people, you know. They were way distant. I mean my science class was huge, so that's understandable. Some of my history classes were big. By the time I took history, which was in the spring, I had already made the decision. So humanities, science, math. You know, my humanities teacher was a good guy, but he was distant, and he was very, very much on a different level in his thought. It's obvious that we want to be like him in that way and be as intelligent as him someday. It didn't seem like he wanted to come down in any way to have an outside class relationship—whether to have coffee with students in their spare time, you know. Seemed like he would be going out of his way to do things like that.

Student 28.

Q: Back when you were thinking of leaving, did you ever talk to a faculty member about doing so?

A: No, I didn't.

Q: Why do you think that's the case?

A: I didn't feel that they could be approached. I mean, I never really had thought about it. I don't think I would have anyway if I would have thought about it. I don't feel that approaching a faculty member would have changed anything.

Q: And why is that?

A: I don't know. I honestly don't think that they could counsel me on the situation. I don't think they could give me an answer one way or the other.

Student 13.

Q: Back when you were thinking of leaving, did you ever talk to a faculty member about doing so?

A: No, I didn't.

Q: Why do you think that's the case?

A: I guess there really wasn't one that I felt I would feel comfortable talking to about it. I had pretty much made up my mind that I wanted to transfer.

Q: Why don't you think you would have felt comfortable talking to a faculty member?

A: There wasn't really one with whom I had developed a relationship deep enough to talk to. Talking to a faculty member didn't even enter my mind. There wasn't really any doubt in my mind when I decided I wanted to transfer. I don't think talking to a faculty member was going to change my mind or help me in my decision at all.

Q: Why not?

A: Because I was sure that I wanted to transfer.

Q: But before you made that decision, do you think a faculty member could have been helpful in any way?

A: Possibly.

Student 12.

Q: Back when you were thinking of leaving, did you ever talk to a faculty member about doing so?

A: No.

Q: Why do you think that's the case?

A: For the same reason that I never established any type of good relationship with any professor that I had: I never felt comfortable enough to speak with anyone. I felt that I was just going to the class, being taught, and that was it, so I never did pursue any type of relationship with any professor there.

Q: Can you say a little more about what you were or what you weren't experiencing in your academic life here?

A: Well, I could say that the professor would have office hours or whatnot, and I would go, but when I would go, it was solely just to talk about improving my writing or improving this or improving that and not necessarily, if it was a professor in my field, being able to have that dialogue. You know, "What should I do? Do you really think I'm ready for this?" or whatever. I

never felt that I could just have that type of conversation with anyone. I felt that I was just going to be told, "Your writing isn't that perfect," and like that. It was more in that sense.

Q: Can you give me a sense of what you were looking for?

A: More of what I was speaking about. Of course things related to the class but also more talking about future classes, giving me advice on other professors within the college that are good or, "This other professor teaches this and this. I don't know if you'd like that." More of that kind of conversation with a professor.

Q: Did you try to have any conversation like that?

A: I did. With one I did, but it actually was better speaking to the TA [teacher's assistant] than with him.

Many faculty members, by virtue of their own achievements, have distanced themselves from those they teach. Astin (1996) drew similar conclusions: Faculty with strong research orientations to their work tend to be less receptive to student interaction. The accounts above call attention to the high academic standards held at the school and the degree to which many students identify with and are prepared to embrace those standards. But generally, it appears that those standards often come at the expense of any meaningful bedside manner. The accounts do not speak of a desire for a less rigorous faculty but for a more interactive one, a faculty more attuned to the human side of their craft.

ACADEMIC ADVISERS

Twenty-five of the leavers saw their college advisers about leaving—usually only once or twice. When leavers went to see their advisers about leaving, however, they did so most often to complete paperwork for leaving or transferring to another school. That is, most leavers met with their advisers at the tail end of their own deliberation process—usually when they had made up their minds to leave and were thus especially unresponsive to intervening measures that might be taken to aid in their stay.

Student 16.

Q: To what extent did you talk with your college adviser about leaving?

A: I think that actually all I really said to her was that I was, when I finally made a decision. I spent quite a bit of time thinking about it because to me it was a big deal, and I wanted to make sure that what I was doing was what I

wanted to be doing and what was right for me. I think the only thing I said to her was that I was leaving. When I finally made the decision, I said, "You know, I'm going to be transferring, and I'm starting the application process, and I need to get a letter of recommendation from you." I told her [that] I'd talked to my family, and we talked. She knew my goals, at least in the program, that is, to finally sort of get into writing and particularly theater writing, and she was fairly supportive of what I was wanting to do. She definitely felt that, just based on how I talked about what I was doing, that she thought that decision was best for me. When I saw her, it was not a particular appointment I made. I think I was registering for classes or something like that.

Student 18.

Q: To what extent did you talk with your college adviser about leaving?

A: Briefly. I mentioned to him, I had him fill out the dean's report. I gave him the form [from my transfer school], and I told him it was something I was considering, and he mentioned if I needed to take a quarter off or if I needed to take a year away, that that's something that I might want to consider if I thought it was too much for me at the [at the school] at that point in my life. But I told him that it wasn't. I didn't think a temporary removal would resolve everything. So I was seriously considering leaving, and he put no pressure on me to stay nor told me to leave, either, so he was very unbiased.

Q: Was the experience in talking with him helpful?

A: Not necessarily. I think I was doing most of the talking, and I was trying to explain to him my reasons for leaving. He didn't necessarily say much.

Student 5.

Q: To what extent did you talk with your college adviser about leaving?

A: We just talked one day about it.

Q: You had one session?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you talk about?

A: It was toward the end of the quarter. I had decided, so it was, probably, a couple weeks before the end of the quarter. He just asked me the reason why, and I just kind of recounted what I've just said.

Q: Were there any kinds of issues sorted out in your mind when you met with the adviser?

A: I think, at that point, I just pretty much wanted to leave.

Q: What stance did your adviser take about leaving?

A: He seemed to be sorry that I made the decision, but he respected my decision, I guess.

Student 13

Q: To what extent did you talk with your college adviser about leaving?

A: I didn't talk to her in great detail about it. She had to write some recommendations for me. I talked to her about why I wasn't happy. I don't recall her saying too much.

Q: What was her stance toward leaving?

A: Her stance was if that's what you've decided, I can't do anything to change it. She didn't really try to do anything to change my decision.

Q: Was talking to your adviser about leaving helpful to you?

A: No, not really.

Q: Why not?

A: Because I didn't really talk to her about leaving. I just told her I was going to leave and why, and she just accepted it.

Q: Why do you think you didn't go to your college adviser and talk about your thinking to leave?

A: She wasn't a person who I felt like talking about it with.

As with faculty, the situation for many students and their advisers appears to be socially defined in such a way that students feel uncomfortable or unprepared to talk about leaving; some students perhaps do not realize that their college advisers can be used for this purpose. It is conceivable that a significant fraction of students see their relationship with their advisers strictly in a procedural perspective—people who handle course registrations, the dropping and adding of courses, the navigation of meeting degree requirements, and the like.

RESIDENTIAL STAFF

Sixteen of the leavers discussed leaving with their resident heads—a position normally occupied by a university staff member or graduate student—or their resident assistants (RAs)—a position occupied by an undergraduate upperclassman. As with advisers, however, they usually met only once or twice, and, as with advisers, some leavers had no such discussion with residential staff. Furthermore, as with advisers, when leavers went to see their residential staff about leaving, they did so most often at the tail end of their

deliberation process. Indeed, several students reported seeing their residential staff to inform them that they would be moving—a charitable step taken, in effect, so that staff would not worry themselves over the vacant room they would find in the dorm.

Student 5.

Q: To what extent did you talk with your resident head about leaving?

A: Probably a few times, maybe two times.

Q: What did you talk about?

A: The same things. I didn't really get to know anybody in the floors.

Q: And how did your resident head react to that?

A: How did they react? I mean, they seemed to be concerned, but that's about it. They were concerned that, you know . . .

Q: Did they try to help in any way?

A: Yes.

Q: How so?

A: We just had some talks, but that's about it.

Q: Did you tell them what you were experiencing, how you were feeling about the school and so on?

A: Yes. I think it's not the school. It was really me. It was my fault. First time in college, and I just didn't do a good job of getting to know people. It was 10 weeks into it, and I looked at it—it's not worth it, you know.

Q: What stance did your resident heads take toward leaving?

A: They were about the same as the [academic] adviser. They said they'd like me to stay, but it's up to me what I do.

Q: Was talking with them helpful?

A: No, not really, because I had made up my mind about 4 or 5 weeks into it, and there was just really nothing they could do.

Q: Do you think there is anything that they could have said or done to have made you rethink your plans?

A: Probably not.

Student 19.

Q: To what extent did you talk with your resident head about leaving?

A: Almost none until the very end.

Q: Did you talk with anyone else in your house about leaving?

A: A little bit to my RA, but that was also at the very, very end.

Q: And what was the nature of those discussions?

A: It was more just explaining my reasons for leaving rather than discussing whether I should leave.

Student 20.

Q: Back when you were thinking of leaving, did you ever talk to a faculty member about doing so?

A: No.

Q: Why do you think that's the case?

A: I was on vacation when the decision was made.

Q: So it was the winter holiday break.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you talk with your college adviser about leaving?

A: No.

Q: Did you talk with your resident head about leaving?

A: No. We [student's family] called the resident head family just to tell them that I was leaving.

Q: Did you talk with anyone else in your [dorm] about leaving?

A: No.

Q: Did you talk with anyone else at the university about leaving?

A: No.

Q: Why didn't you talk to people or to more people about leaving?

A: I don't know. I felt that it was my 1st year. I didn't know that many people that well, and the thought never occurred to me to call anyone to talk about it.

Just as the problem plagued the advising system, so too can it be seen in the housing system: Often housing staff learn of students' desires to leave late in the game, so late that intervention would be inconsequential.

Among the smaller subset of students who sought out residence staff earlier in the process of deciding to leave, there was a pervasive sense of ease, flexibility, and latitude in what decision the student should make. On one hand, this finding is not surprising: Residence staff, as the name indicates, are part of students' home environments at college, and most staff see their role as one to make students feel comfortable.

On the other hand, one might question the level of scrutiny that residence staff use with students who have expressed interest in leaving.

Student 11.

Q: To what extent did you talk with your resident head about leaving?

A: I really had the coolest resident heads. They had this dog, and I always ran with it outside. They were just really cool to talk to, but I think for them—well, let me explain my situation a little more. Like I said, I came in and I knew I wanted to go to Duke, and I was uncompromisingly obsessed with getting into Duke, so the whole time I was there, I went out a little with friends, but most people knew I wanted to leave, especially who were in my residence hall. It would come up every once in a while, but it was a nonissue.

Q: Did you talk with your resident head about leaving?

A: I don't know. They knew. I think we talked about, because I was probably their favorite resident. They were really cool, and they were really friendly. They were at the dinner table a lot, and they had this dog. [Spot]. Like I said, I ran with it a lot. I whipped that dog into shape, and you could talk with them about anything, it seemed like. But yes, we talked about that, and they knew my reasons. They were just very cool.

Q: What was their stance toward you leaving?

A: Their stance was—hmm. Maybe that's why I liked them so much. They were so nonconfrontational. I'm not really sure. I think it was just like, "We know what you're thinking. We know your reasons. If you can do it, that's great." They honestly were like, "[Spot's] really going to miss you, and we're really going to miss you. If you decide to go, we wish you the best of luck, but we're going to miss you." That was like the whole of their stance, really.

The implied institutional stance toward leaving, though perhaps not explicit, is one of permissiveness. From this account as from others, students are seen as capable of making decisions on their own. Although the decision to leave or to stay is ultimately theirs to make, it seems as though additional and more vigorous counsel—from all the key actors in the process—would aid in students' decisions, providing a more substantive base on which to make them.

BEYOND THE FACULTY, ADVISERS, AND RESIDENTIAL STAFF

What people—outside of faculty, advisers, and residential staff—come into play in students' decisions to leave? The answer is quite simple: very few. Most students, directly or indirectly, reported that they discussed leaving with their parents. This is not surprising. Parents, most of whom are paying substantial sums of money for their children's education, must be informed about possibilities of leaving. And when those possibilities are aired, there is little doubt that students must provide a rationale, or at least modest explanation.

Another section of the interviews sought to gather data on what other people—besides faculty, advisers, and residential staff—students talked to in the course of thinking about leaving. The questions yielded little. The lack of information gathered from this section of the interviews is a finding in its own right. Most students who are thinking about leaving simply do not talk about it. A handful of students reported talking with a coach here and there, with some friends here and there. For the vast majority of leavers, though, the decision is made quietly.

Not only does the departure process occur quietly at this school, but it also occurs quickly, following national trends (Tinto, 1987). Eighteen (14.2% of the population) stayed for just one 11-week quarter. Twenty (15.7%) stayed for two quarters. Fifty-six leavers (44.1% of the population) stayed for three quarters—1 academic year. By the time we get to the three-quarter mark, we have accounted for fully 78.0% of the leavers. The next time period at which there is sizeable exit is at the end of six quarters—after a 2nd year—when 16, or 12.6%, of the leavers left. Clearly though, the 1st year is critical for people at risk of leaving. It is apparent that, indeed, one's early experiences, and lack of experiences, in the first weeks of college play a crucial role in attrition and retention. In considering the amount of time leavers stay at the university, the departure process is compounded, indeed compromised: Time is not on a school's side.

DISCUSSION

This article began with a specific research question: How does the process of attrition actually transpire? To answer it, the analysis has focused on the communication and interaction patterns underlying students' ultimate decisions to depart.

In case after case, the data reveal that very little communication and interaction occur between students and university personnel in the process leading up to attrition. Students thinking about leaving almost never consulted faculty, academic advisers, or residential staff. When interaction about leaving did take place with these people, it was usually at the conclusion of students' own deliberation processes, when strategies for intervention are at their weakest. Students rarely even mentioned school friends as people with whom they talked over the possibility of leaving, perhaps because leavers typically left early in their college careers, which did not afford the opportunity to make close confidants. Besides parents, students thinking about

leaving talked to few people: The decision to leave the school most often occurred in social isolation.

What is more, the school's location in an urban milieu appears to have exerted little influence on the character of the departure process or on the reasons students provided for leaving. Reasons for leaving this institution, like almost all institutions, are considerably diverse rather than systematically linked to the school's location, much as findings in related studies have indicated (Hermanowicz, 2003, *in press*).

We might expect that students leaving a school would devote considerable time, thought, energy, and exchange in reaching their decision to leave; this might be thought of as even more expected in a selective school. Resources originally devoted to making the match would seemingly beg a similar commitment to a course of action that ultimately overturns the momentous decision to enroll. This study has revealed a departure process that belies such expectations.

The attrition process may be longitudinal (Tinto, 1987), but it is short lived from the standpoint of institutions. Taking a "student-centered" approach (Stage & Hossler, 2000), like the one here, suggests the core factors with which institutions must grapple to enhance retention: a departure process that occurs quietly and quickly.

A policy issue is that students cannot be identified on the basis of their departure risk. Short of knowing which students are most vulnerable to attrition at the time of entry, this reality can compel schools to view and treat all students as at risk. Intervention strategies are thus targeted not to a select few but to everyone on the basis of having enrolled. Modes of intervention can run the gamut—from housing, dining, advising to faculty initiatives. Yet the chief criterion appears to be sustained communication and interaction with new students, who can be appropriately counseled when their concerns arise. From a grounded view (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), these strategies establish the theoretical importance, and practical consequences, of students' academic and social integration in college (Tinto, 1987). Significant gains can be made in educating a higher proportion of college students admitted to this and other schools. This may be done by educating all students to talk about themselves and by educating faculty, advisers, resident heads, counselors, and coaches to listen, challenge, and support students.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This has been a case study of attrition at a single institution. Thus, this work has been offered as an exploratory study into how attrition occurs at a selective university, a work that may yield insight about generic characteristics of attrition processes occurring at other institutions. It is unclear whether students from the university used in the present study have any more incentive to leave quietly than do students elsewhere. On one hand, departure from a selective school, one in which both school and student are selective, may be seen as more stigmatizing: Perceptions of student failure may be especially keen when the institutional stress on student success is high. On the other hand, attrition from any school, regardless of its selectivity, may be perceived (by students and schools alike) as a failing and thus as something to conceal. By this reasoning, one would expect to find similar patterns of low decibels registered in the departure process at other schools.

Tinto's interactional model of attrition (1987) postulated both academic and social integration as keys to persistence. Only social integration has been dealt with in the present work. Studies that adopt a student-centered perspective and look at academic integration would help fill the void. Such studies have the potential to reveal, through the experiences and interpretations of students, how they succeed or fail in finding intellectual niches in institutions. Following Tinto's perspective, interaction is key for academic as well as for social integration. Therefore, future student-centered work will necessarily need to investigate how interactions between students and schools shape the intellectual trajectories of the college-going population.

This study has found that, in leading up to attrition, interaction between students and key university officials either does not occur or occurs primarily at the end of students' deliberation processes when intervention measures would be least effective. The study has not investigated whether students who stay have had interactions with key university officials that have fostered the students' persistence. Such students also may have experienced little or no such interaction. This scenario would contradict Tinto's model, if we accept the logic that persistence occurs as a result of successful integration made possible by interaction between students and their college environments. Some students may persist in the absence of significant interaction and engagement with the academic and social sides of schools. This remains an empirical question for future work.

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