

The Quality of Student Life and Financial Costs: The Cost of Social Isolation

Daniel L. Kegan Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation, Hampshire College

Student personnel often find their concerns for the quality of student life receiving too little support from campus decision makers. The isolating atmosphere of a college was found to be a significant factor in student attrition and that attrition in turn cost the small college more than 1 percent of its total annual operating budget of eight million dollars. The methodology of relating student attrition problems to quality of life issues is suggested as appropriate for many colleges.

College student personnel staff are concerned in theory and in practice with the quality of student life. Alienation, isolation, identity formation, increasing competence in interpersonal relations—these and many more issues are active concerns for students and student-oriented service staff. Few campus decision makers would deny the importance of these concerns. Yet when limited resources must be allocated and some issues receive priority over other issues, all too often quality of life issues seem to slip behind the financial and academic concerns of primary interest to other segments of the college community.

This article presents a brief study relating the quality of student life to financial costs. Specifically, the isolating social atmosphere of one small college was found to be a significant factor in student attrition and that attrition in turn cost the college more than 1 percent of its total annual operating budget of eight million dollars. Although this study was conducted at a nontraditional institution, the

David Reuman conducted the telephone interviews and assisted in drafting the internal report on which this article is based. This research was partially supported by a research subcontract from Empire State College, which in turn received a grant entitled "Developing Cost/Effectiveness Models for Postsecondary Education" from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

methodology is suggested as appropriate for most colleges of whatever size or educational philosophy.

STUDENT ATTRITION

Student attrition has been receiving increased attention from campus administrators concerned about balancing their budgets and from administrators and student personnel concerned about the deeper ills for which attrition is but a symptom. Hampshire College, along with much of American higher education, has a serious problem with student retention—it loses too many students. From both the student and the institutional perspective, attrition represents a significant cost.

Because of Hampshire's liberal leave policy and its lack of an expectation of graduation exactly four years after matriculation, its definition of withdrawal is someone who withdraws from the College and does not return to it. The sole measure of a student's academic good standing at Hampshire is his or her progress on six divisional examinations—student-initiated and -designed learning contracts approved by a faculty member. A student begins in Division I, which consists of four distribution exams, and graduates from Division III. Hampshire participates with Amherst College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts in a Five-College Consortium. Students at any of these five colleges may register for and attend classes offered by any of the other five colleges relatively easily.

Hampshire's withdrawal rate (nearly all voluntary) per entering class is a fairly steady 40 percent. Because of this rate, each year the

College has a large proportion of new students and a larger proportion of Division I students. Roughly 300 students a year graduate, approximately 200 students a year withdraw. Thus, the Admissions Office must find almost twice the number of qualified applicants than they would have to without student attrition.

Of course some withdrawal cannot be avoided; some should not be. But Hampshire has too much. The national average for dropouts or "stopouts," those not completing a bachelor's degree within four years of matriculation, is 40 percent (Cope & Hannah 1975). This national average, however, combines community college attrition rates of over 80 percent with those of elite liberal arts colleges with attrition rates of under 10 percent.

National studies have found that a major cause of attrition is the lack of fit between a student's developmental schedule and that assumed by the four-year program of most colleges (Cope & Hannah 1975; Hirsch & Keniston 1970; Shulman 1976; Timmons 1975). Yet Hampshire's lack of a rigid freshman-senior sequence and its flexible leave policy should avoid this cause of withdrawal.

What are the causes of our students' withdrawals? What are these students doing now? How do they now view their experience at Hampshire? How do they now evaluate their decision to withdraw from Hampshire? These and related questions were investigated in a telephone survey of a sample of our withdrawals.

METHOD

Four hundred and seven students withdrew from Hampshire during the two academic years 1973 to 1975. From this group of 407, a random sample of 50 students was drawn. Thirty-one students (62%) were contacted by telephone. Interviews averaged 25 minutes; no student contacted refused to be interviewed. Compared to other studies of attrition, to other attempts to contact people one or two years after they had left an organization, or to other survey research projects, this response rate was very good. The 31 interviewed students are representative of the 407 withdrawals in terms of the number of terms actively enrolled at Hampshire, the number of

divisional examinations completed, the number of Five-College courses taken, the proportion withdrawing from a leave or from active enrollment, and percentage of men.

INITIAL RESULTS

The factors contributing to students' decisions to withdraw were grouped into three categories. First, 60 percent cited problems with educational direction or resources. These problems included a personal lack of motivation (20%), specialized interests thought better pursued elsewhere (20%), a lack of facilities, advising, good courses, or access to faculty (18%), or the insufficiency of Hampshire as a radical alternative (2%). Second, 20 percent cited Hampshire's social atmosphere, with equal proportions describing alienation, isolation and lack of community support, and the homogeneity of students. Third, 15 percent cited cost considerations, feeling that Hampshire was no longer worth that much money or having a financial aid reduction (see Demos 1968; also see Dresch 1975 on how the poor national economy lowers the cost of college). Six percent had family or medical problems.

Previous studies of Hampshire underscore the importance of satisfaction with academic progress and of not feeling isolated from other people at the College. Only 22 percent of the students in this study said they were satisfied with their Hampshire experience while enrolled. In contrast, Cycles surveys, which are 50-item questionnaires periodically used to monitor the quality of student life, over the past several terms have found general student satisfaction with the Hampshire experience to be 80 percent. Not surprisingly, dissatisfaction may be a good predictor of intention to withdraw.

Although Hampshire's withdrawal rate per entering class has been a fairly steady 40 percent, few of these are dropouts from higher education: 85 percent have obtained or plan to obtain a bachelor's degree. For some students who withdraw, the Hampshire experience is a useful and necessary stage in their growth and education. Some students initially misperceive the fit between themselves and the College; catalogs and admissions processes should be studied to try to minimize the likelihood of such misperception. Finally,

some students withdraw who could benefit from continuing at the College. Attention to faculty work responsibilities and to course and advising quality could help retain some students who withdraw for academic reasons. Attention to problems of student isolation would not only retain some students but would improve the quality of life for many students who do not withdraw.

SECONDARY STUDY

After the initial analysis of withdrawals from the College, the data from that study was used in combination with previous studies of the quality of student life at the College to estimate the cost to the College of inadequate or inaccessible advising, of students isolated from one another, and of lack of community support mechanisms. An approximate cost was derived: the College loses over \$100,000 a year because of its isolating social environment.

Table 1 indicates the major reported reasons for withdrawal and apportions them among academic, social, and exogenous factors. For example, two thirds of the problem with specialized interests is attributed in this analysis to academic factors that could be improved, such as better courses or advising, while one third is attributed to exogenous factors the College cannot control. Similarly, two thirds of the problem with alienation is attributed to social factors the College could improve, while one third is attributed to exogenous factors the College cannot control. The attributions of causality are rough assumptions, but they are reasonable and serve to yield an initial rough estimate of the cost of deficient academic or social programs at the College.

The relationship between student isolation and academics needs additional comment. It is assumed that if students who withdrew had been more connected with other students who were excitedly engaged in intellectual pursuits, then the withdrawal-prone students may have been more likely to find an academic path of interest and thus lack of personal motivation would become less of a reason for withdrawal. The homogeneity of Hampshire students, a reported contributor to withdrawal, primarily reflects the withdrawn students' feelings of being outside the dominant group and their lack of any other positive group of students with which to identify and interact. A withdrawal-prone student would be more likely to remain actively enrolled if he or she felt more identification with and reward from the College.

From this analysis of Hampshire withdrawals it was found that 25 percent of the withdrawals or 50 students a year leave due to social factors. At \$2,045 tuition a term, this amounts to \$102,250 a term lost to the College. Much of this cost may be considered a true cost to the College, since it has been unable to maintain its desired enrollment of 1,300 students.

Achieving the desired enrollment of 1,300 would somewhat decrease the proportionate cost of fixed, administrative, and other overhead expenses. Much more important is the fact that if the College had a lower withdrawal rate, admissions staff would be under less pressure to find qualified applicants and the College would be able to enjoy more certainty in enrollment projections for future budgeting.

The College's rate of felt isolation is not immutably connected with the American college experience. In April 1975 simultane-

TABLE 1
Reasons for Withdrawal Allocated Among Academic, Social, or Exogenous Factors

Reasons for Withdrawal	%	Allocations		
		Academic	Social	Exogenous
Lack of personal motivation	20	1/3	1/3	1/3
Specialized interests	20	2/3		1/3
Lack of facilities	20	2/3		1/3
Alienation	10		2/3	1/3
Homogeneity of students	10		2/3	1/3
Cost	15	1/3	1/3	1/3
Family/medical	6			3/3
Total %	101	38%	25%	38%

ous Cycles surveys were conducted at Hampshire College, Amherst College, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst—colleges within five miles of one another (Kegan, Benedict & Grose 1975). At Amherst and the University, 40 percent of the participating students reported that they felt isolated from most of the people at their college. At Hampshire, the reported sense of isolation was 60 percent. Not feeling isolated from other people at college has been found to be an important contributor toward satisfaction with one's college experience (Kegan 1975); this study found that students who withdraw are much less satisfied with their college experience than are students who remain.

Altogether then, there are substantial financial, psychological, and educational costs resulting from an isolating social atmosphere. Thus substantial financial, psychological, and educational benefits could occur if a college worked to decrease its isolating atmosphere and to increase students' engagement with each other. The academic program and the personal dispositions of Hampshire students contribute to their individual freedom and also to their isolation; however, it is possible to develop support systems to balance the isolating factors.

CONCLUSION

There are several implications of this study for college student personnel. Methodologically, it was an inexpensive study: Interviewer and telephone costs were less than \$350. Symbolically, it was a study with major impact. The study provided an opportunity for correcting campus misperceptions of our attrition rate and focusing attention on the problem. Administratively, a formal retention program was instituted to try to reduce our attrition rate. This many-faceted program involves greater contact with students on leave, more active monitoring of and discussions with potential withdrawals, more active monitoring of students' academic progress,

the establishment of new student support groups convened by faculty or staff, and a general campuswide (administrative and faculty) heightened awareness of the attrition problem.

In Hampshire's experience, being able to connect difficulties with social isolation and student quality of life to a specific proportion of withdrawals and thus to actual financial cost to the College has given substantial support to student personnel proposals and programs. It has served as a linkage between the quality of life concerns of our student personnel staff and some of the more immediate financial concerns of other administrative offices and has helped to underscore the belief that the quality of student life is important.

REFERENCES

- Cope, R. G., & Hannah, W. *Revolving college doors: The causes and consequences of dropping out, stopping out, and transferring*. New York: Wiley, 1975.
- Demos, G. D. Analysis of college dropouts—Some manifest and cover reasons. *Personnel & Guidance Journal*, 1968, 46, 681-684.
- Dresch, S. A curmudgeon's view of the future of academe. In *Coping in the 70's: Papers from the second annual meeting of the North East Association for Institutional Research*, November 1975.
- Hirsch, S. J., & Keniston, K. Psychosocial issues in talented college dropouts. *Psychiatry*, 1970, 33, 1-20.
- Kegan, D. L. *The augmented end-of-year Cycles survey, April 1975* (Report No. W31). Amherst, Mass.: Hampshire College, Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation, 1975.
- Kegan, D. L. *Some policy recommendations from institutional research* (Report No. W61). Amherst, Mass.: Hampshire College, Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation, 1976.
- Kegan, D. L.; Benedict, L.; & Grose, R. Developing and using quality of student life indicators: The Cycles surveys at Hampshire College, Amherst College, and the University of Massachusetts, April 1975. In *Coping in the 70's: Papers from the second annual meeting of the North East Association for Institutional Research*, November 1975.
- Shulman, C. H. Recent trends in student retention. *AAHE College and University Bulletin*, 1976, 28, 9.
- Timmons, F. R. Research on college dropouts. In B. L. Bloom (Ed.), *Psychological stress in the campus community*. New York: Behavioral Publications, 1975.

Received 4 November 1976