



AIRO DATA BRIEF

Non-Returning Student Survey Fall 1999

Assessment & Institutional Research Office - AIRO, The University of Scranton, July 2000

Purpose

In December of 1999, AIRO conducted a Non-returning Student survey (NRS). The survey's purpose was to *attempt* to identify reasons why students chose not to return to the University of Scranton (UofS).

Survey Instrument

NRS items were based on a number of other institutions' "withdrawing" student surveys. The NRS contained five main sections: demographics, possible obstacles encountered while at UofS, level of involvement in activities while at UofS, overall importance and satisfaction with various aspects of UofS, and a list of six broad factors: social, facilities, financial, academic, career, and personal. In addition to ratings, the survey asked former students to rank the top five (of a total 18) most important obstacles in their decision not to return to UofS and to rank the six broad factors in terms of their influence in that decision. It also contained three open-ended questions. A copy of the survey instrument is provided on pages 7 & 8 of this Data Brief.

Survey Population & Response Rate

The survey population consisted of day school undergraduate students who were enrolled full-time in fall 1998, attended in spring 1999 (either full- or part-time) but did not return to UofS in fall 1999. A group of non-returning students had never previously been surveyed by AIRO. After the Deans and Registrar checked the list of withdrawn students for accuracy, removing expelled students, deceased students, and those known to be returning to UofS in spring 2000, there were a total of 76 students to survey. The few students available for the NRS survey is another indication of our excellent retention rates. In an attempt to increase the response rate, we conducted a lottery for prizes. This technique yielded a good response rate of 43% given the type of student surveyed. However, due to the small population available, this decent response rate represents a fairly small number of responding students (n=33). Thus, we strongly suggest the results reported here be used with caution. This Data Brief supplements AIRO's regular reporting on retention & graduation rates. Please refer to AIRO's July 2000 HEDS and CSRDE Data Briefs on retention and graduation rates.

Results

Due to the small NRS population (N=76 students) it is necessary to compare profiles of respondents and non-respondents. Appendix A on page 6 provides a comparison of NRS student profiles.

The two groups differed slightly in several ways including gender, home state, average SAT math scores, and most importantly class. Based on the respondent's class level, this Data Brief reports primarily on withdrawing freshmen and represents information on the first-year attrition rate (averages 1 in 10 at UofS).

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS:

HIGH-SCHOOL:

The majority of respondents came from public high schools (61%) with most others coming from parochial schools (36%).

HIGH-SCHOOL GPA:

They had fairly good high school GPAs with 10% reporting a 4.0, 31% falling between 3.6-3.9, and 38% between a 3.0-3.5. Only 16% were below a 3.0.

RESIDENCY WHILE AT UofS:

Approximately two-thirds lived in a UofS residence hall (69%) and most others lived with their parents (28%).

COMMUTING TO UofS BY CAR:

Most (66%) of these former freshmen reported that they did not commute to campus via a car. This is consistent with the percent reporting they lived in a UofS residence. For those who did commute (34%), the largest group drove fewer than 5 miles (16%).

WORKING FOR PAY WHILE AT UofS:

Slightly more than half (53%) worked for pay during their freshmen year at UofS with most of them working 6-10 hours on-campus or 16-20 hours off-campus.

CURRENT STATUS (as of December 1999):

Most were full-time students at another institution (84%), 50% were working part-time, and 60% had a different major at their current institution than their final major at UofS.

FINANCING OF UofS EDUCATION:

Their first-year at UofS was primarily funded by family savings (34%), followed by scholarships (16%), loans (13%), grants (9%), and very little from personal savings (3%).

WHO THEY RELATED TO WHILE HERE:

The overwhelming majority (84%) said they related to at least one other student, many with a professor (50%) and a few with a staff member (19%).

OBSTACLES THEY FACED WHILE AT UofS

The NRS obstacles section provided former UofS students the opportunity to rate how important 18 items were in their decision not to return to UofS using the scale: very, somewhat, not very, not-at-all. We also asked former students to rank the top five most important obstacles in that decision. (Please refer to questions 1. A. & 1. B. on the survey instrument on pages 7 & 8). Nearly 60% (19/32) found the obstacle of "developing a sense of belonging," a social/personal factor, very or somewhat important in their decision not to return. The top five obstacles in descending order were:

TOP FIVE OBSTACLES - RATINGS

1. Developing a sense of belonging - 59% (social/personal factor)
3. Choice of available majors - 35% (career factor)
3. Budgeting time for academic and social activities - 35% (academic factor)
5. Academic rigor - 34% (academic factor)
5. Academic performance - 34% (academic factor)

Although there were three academic factors listed in the top five obstacles, only one-third marked these as very or somewhat important. Clearly "developing a sense of belonging" was their most influential obstacle.

NRS students ranked the top five (of 18 total) most important obstacles in their decision not to return. Our scale was from 1 (most) to 5 (lowest). Ranked in descending order the top five obstacles were:

TOP FIVE OBSTACLES - RANKING

1. Insufficient funds (financial factor)
2. Choice of available majors (career factor)
3. Developing a sense of belonging (social/personal factor)
4. Being homesick (personal factor)
5. Making my own decisions (personal factor)

The only item that appears on both the rating and ranking results is "developing a sense of belonging," a social/personal factor. This item is an example of Vincent Tinto's theory of "individual student and institutional fit" (see the seminal work on student attrition "Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition", Tinto, The University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition, 1993).

THEIR INVOLVEMENT/EFFORT IN ACTIVITIES

This NRS section contained 25 items that dealt with student involvement in various aspects of a UofS education. This section attempted to uncover the amount of effort students put into their education and experience. NRS students were asked how often they participated in certain activities while at UofS. We used a scale of very often, often, seldom, and never. Item stems began with an action word and ended with some specific activity, e.g. met with faculty outside of class, used library resources, spent weekends on campus, discussed career plans with a faculty member, attended religious services, etc. For the following results we collapse the "very often" and "often" scales to represent level of effort. Using the collapsed scale, in descending order the top five items these former freshmen were involved in were:

HIGHEST INVOLVEMENT/EFFORT

1. Used library resources or studied in library - 82% (facilities factor)
2. Set goals for academic performance - 75% (personal factor)
3. Participated in classroom discussions - 73% (academic factor)
4. Read/Thought/Discussed issues in your field of study - 72% (academic factor)
5. Discussed career plans with peers - 66% (career factor)

Four of the six broad factors are represented in the above findings. The results show that these students reported being involved in and putting effort into many diverse areas of their education and experiences while at UofS. It is interesting to note that a social factor did not make the top five.

IMPORTANCE AND SATISFACTION WITH ASPECTS OF UofS

This section of the NRS provided former students with a list of 26 aspects of the university most would have experienced while attending. Students were asked to rate how important each aspect was in their decision not to return as well as how satisfied they were with that aspect. The importance and satisfaction scales were very, somewhat, not very, and not-at-all. In descending order, the following are the top five aspects of the university these former freshmen thought were very or somewhat important in their decision not to return:

HIGHLY IMPORTANT

1. Financial aid - 69% (financial factor)
2. Social Life - 66% (social factor)
3. University environment - 65% (social factor)
4. Local area (Scranton) - 62% (social factor)
5. Attitudes of peers - 60% (social factor)

In descending order, the following are the top aspects they were very or somewhat satisfied with:

HIGHLY SATISFIED

1. Library - 97% (facilities factor)
2. Faculty outside major - 81% (academic factor)
4. Computing facilities - 79% (facilities factor)
4. Student activities - 79% (facilities factor)
7. Instruction - 78% (academic factor)
7. Telephone registration - 78% (facilities factor)
7. Student services - 78% (facilities factor)

We note here that all of the satisfaction scores listed above are higher than the highest importance score. Further, the average importance score for all of this section's items is 55 while the average satisfaction score is 73. NRS respondents reported being quite satisfied with most aspects of the University. Overall, these former freshmen thought social factors were most important in their decision not to return and were most satisfied with UofS' facilities.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THEIR DECISION

The final section of the NRS asked students to rate and rank how important six broad factors were in their decision not to return to UofS. This question's response scale was very, somewhat, not very, or not-at-all important. Using the combined very and somewhat important scales, the factors rated important in their decision not to return are presented in descending order:

1. Personal factors - 82%
2. Academic factors - 72%
3. Social factors - 66%
4. Financial factors - 59%
5. Career factors - 56%
6. Facilities factors - 31%

The ranking of these factors produced the same order. These results are similar to reported findings from other institutions and from national studies on student attrition. Most studies report that students leave an institution for personal reasons. An institution does not have much bearing on or control over most personal reasons.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

NRS students were provided with three open-ended questions. The three questions, in order on the survey, were: what was your greatest disappointment at UofS, what was most fulfilling at UofS, and what could the University of Scranton have done to have kept you pursuing your degree at UofS?

What was your greatest disappointment at UofS?

Thirty-three respondents provided narrative comments to this question, some with multiple comments, therefore a total of 51 comments were provided. The majority (88%) of the comments fell within the categories of social, academic, and career. Thus there is consistency in the response to this question and the previous question regarding "obstacles they faced at UofS". Specific examples that were most frequently mentioned by the respondents included disappointment with their major, classes, student attitudes, lack of diversity and the city of Scranton.

What was the most fulfilling at UofS?

There were 57 items mentioned by the thirty-three respondents. The categories in which they were most fulfilled were with the academics, faculty, and University services. Comments about the positive qualities of the University's facilities were also noted.

What could the University of Scranton have done to have kept you pursuing your degree at UofS?

Fifty percent of the respondents stated that the University could not have done anything to have them continue. Specific comments included "did not fit in", "personal reasons", "lack of diversity" and "tuition costs".

The majority of these former students did not speak poorly of their freshman year. Comments contain many references to their decision being for personal reasons. For example, in response to the question 'what could the U have done to have kept you pursuing your degree at UofS' a former freshman wrote:

Very little actually. My dissatisfaction was more with my classmates than with the U. I still think it is a great school if you fit into that student body. I appreciate all that the University and its staff did for me, but I just didn't want to stay.

A complete copy of all responses is available in AIRO.

SUMMARY

The NRS results cautiously suggest the following picture of why these students withdrew. Based on respondent demographics, these former freshmen reported being as academically prepared for a UofS education as their entering counterparts who remained at the University. According to the involvement section results, they were actively involved in their education and the academic experiences the University offers. The high satisfaction scores on aspects of the university suggest that they did not leave because they were dissatisfied with the University. So why did they withdraw? When asked how important various aspects of their experiences at the University were to them, four of the top five were social items. The highest rated and ranked factor in their decision not to return was "personal." Responses to open-ended questions reinforce the decision not to return being for personal reasons. So why didn't they return?

The key finding seems to be the obstacle of not developing a sense of belonging at the University of Scranton. Recall that 84% reported being full-time students at another institution. The NRS results suggest a poor "fit" between the individual student and UofS. The University has a fine academic reputation and offers students a substantial number of services to aid them in their education and experiences here. It seems reasonable to expect a few incoming students to decide after one year, for personal reasons, to withdraw from UofS and pursue their education at another institution.

AIRO will continue to monitor and report on retention and graduation rates.

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Appendix A - NRS Student Profiles

	Respondents (n=33)	Non-Respondents (n=43)	Total Population (n=76)
Gender			
Female	69%	48%	21%
School			
CAS	63%	66%	-3%
CPS	19%	18%	1%
KSOM	19%	16%	3%
Class			
Freshmen	78%	52%	26%
Sophomore	22%	27%	-5%
Junior	0%	18%	-18%
Senior	0%	3%	-3%
State			
PA	47%	48%	-1%
NJ	19%	30%	-11%
NY	25%	18%	7%
Other	9%	4%	5%
SAT Scores			
Avg. Verbal	539	529	10 points
Avg. Math	551	527	24 points