Goals and Distractions: Explanations of Early Attrition from Traditional University Freshmen

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Abstract

This grounded theory study was designed to investigate the factors that influenced 20 "traditional" university freshmen to withdraw prior to the end of their first year at two Midwestern universities. A two-hour audio- taped interview was conducted with each of the participants, and the grounded theory method was utilized to analyze the interview data. Eighteen of the twenty participants had strong high school GPAs and ACT scores, and would not have been identified as being at-risk for attrition. The grounded theory that emerged from the participants' data indicated that an absence of clear educational goals, as well as individual and institutional distractions, interacted to contribute to the participants' withdrawal from their universities.

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More than 2.2 million first-time freshmen enter higher education in the United States each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992), and 25 to 30 percent of them do not return to their initial institution of choice for the second year (American College Testing Program, 1998). Institutions typically lose the greatest number of students during the freshman year, especially during the first semester (Porter, 1989; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Students moving directly from high school to a college or university face many new challenges concerning social and academic adjustment. This new environment can leave students feeling anonymous and isolated (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969), particularly if they held unrealistic expectations about college or university life (Boyer, 1987).When their social and academic expectations are not met, students are much more likely to withdraw before their second year (Tinto, 1998).

It is disconcerting that otherwise qualified students, who have made a significant commitment to attend a university, might opt to leave school so quickly. Previous research has indicated that once students have successfully made the transition to the university environment, attrition is less of an issue. During a four year study, Horn (1998) reported that 61% of students who persisted to the second year went on to graduate after their fourth year, and an additional 15% were still enrolled after their fourth year, while pursuing their bachelor's degree.

Why would students leave school as early as two weeks into their first semester at a college or university? Many researchers have utilized a quantitative risk-factor

perspective to explain post-secondary attrition. Brawer (1996), for example, identified full-time employment, low grade point averages, ethnic minority status (excluding Asian), family responsibilities, and finances as correlates of attrition. Martinez and Munday (1998) identified low socioeconomic status, poor course placement, late application to college, having few friends, and lack of interest in, or satisfaction with courses as statistical risk factors.

Horn (1998) found that students who were not integrated into the academic program (not involved with peers and faculty), or who were first-generation college students, were at greater risk for early departure. Thus, similar to the secondary education attrition literature (e.g., Benard, 1993), the post-secondary attrition literature has largely focused on the risk factors for attrition.

However, the risk factor perspective may lead researchers in unproductive directions. Surface characteristics are imprecise in determining at-risk status, creating false negatives (i.e., overlooking students who do not fit into the traditional at-risk groups, but who may withdraw, which was found in this study) and false positives (i.e., falsely identifying students as being at-risk, when they may not be). Further, focusing on background or sociodemographic characteristics does little to advance understanding of the reasons why students with the identified risk factors might withdraw. Thus, more malleable predictors of attrition need to be investigated to create interventions that may help prevent attrition and increase resiliency (Rausch, Lovett, & Walker, 2003; Rausch & VanMeter, 1999).

Based on an extensive statistical analysis of data from American College Testing (ACT), and United States Department of Education statistics, Tinto's (1993, 1997, 1998) Student Integration Model portrayed that common themes emerging in higher education research about attrition "pertain to the dispositions of individuals who enter higher education, to the character of their interactional experiences within the institutions following entry, and to the external forces which sometimes influence their behavior within the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p. 37). Tinto related that attrition was impacted by the match between students' commitment to their educational goals, and their commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1993).

Bean (1982, 1985) developed another quantitative perspective with his Student Attrition Model. Based on the idea of work-place turnover, Bean (1982) examined the impact of behavioral intentions to stay or leave as predictors of persistence. Bean's model portrayed beliefs and decisions as being impacted by institutional factors such as institutional quality, courses, financial aid, and perceptions about opportunities to transfer to other institutions. Bean (1985) also added more emphasis on the potential positive or negative impacts of external factors such as family and peer group.

Research comparing Tinto's and Bean's models by Cabrera, Nora, Castaneda, and Hengstler (1992) concluded that the two models were complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. Both models provided empirical support for many of their hypotheses, and both models accounted for substantial amounts of variance in attrition-related factors such as persistence. Utilizing both models would account for the impacts of the individual, the institution, and external forces on student attrition (Cabrera et al.).

Additional studies have supported the models provided by Tinto and Bean. In their quantitative analysis of attrition at a single suburban community college, Napoli and Workman (1998) concluded that early goal commitment, social support, personal

emotional adjustment capabilities, satisfaction with college, and social and academic integration were all important psychosocial components that were positively related to persistence.

Among students at a comprehensive research university, Bragg (1994) found that the most negative experiences for students were making the transition from high school to college academics, homesickness, stress, and commuting. One-half of the participants reported feeling lonely "a lot" at college (p. 62). Bragg also noted that

(a) students scoring lower on intent-to-persist scales reported more social adjustment difficulties, more stress, and decreased confidence in their academic and career goals, and (b) students who considered dropping out had significantly lower scores in social, academic, and personal adjustment, scored lower on institutional/goal commitment and intent-to-persist, and were less satisfied with their first semester. (p. 62)

The studies conducted by Tinto (1993, 1997, 1998), Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfle (1986), Bean (1982, 1985), Napoli and Workman (1998), and Bragg (1994) provide a more thorough understanding of university attrition. Rather than just group membership, these studies have identified individual characteristics related to attrition that may be addressed through intervention such as intent to persist, personal adjustment, and attitudes. They also found environmental factors that could be addressed, including social networking, perceived social support, and contact with faculty. These studies point toward a likely interaction of these two factors, the person-environment fit, which leads toward a deeper understanding of attrition that has not been examined through previous risk factor analyses (Cabrera et al., 1992).

However, much of the previous research has been focused on quantitative predictors of attrition in general, and has not provided in-depth analysis of the reasons behind individual students' decisions to withdraw. Previous research has not provided qualitative studies that were focused upon students who had withdrawn as early as two weeks into their postsecondary careers. Bean (1985) suggested that factors leading to withdrawal this early may be different than those leading to withdrawal at later points. Thus, the goal of this study was to utilize a grounded theory approach to examine the personal decisions for such early postsecondary attrition. Tinto (1993) advocated for the need of both quantitative and qualitative research regarding attrition issues. Tinto supported the generalizability for which quantitative methods are credited, but he also explained that educational administrators need more detail typically provided by qualitative methods that will "enable the institution to uncover how students make sense of their experience" (Tinto, 1993, p. 217).

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer two general research questions: (a) What factors contribute to early attrition at the university level? and (b) What impact does this short-lived university experience have on the students who have departed? The goal of this study was not just to describe the phenomenon of early attrition, but to develop a

grounded theory that might help explain the reasons for attrition for the participants in this study.

Methodology

Sample

There were two participating universities, both in the Midwestern United States. One was a larger research university, and the other was a smaller liberal arts university. Institutional Review Board approval was granted from each university prior to collecting data from that university. Former traditional-age freshmen students from within each state who were enrolled on the first day of classes of the fall semester, and who subsequently withdrew from all courses by the end of that first year, were asked to participate. In this study, traditional-age freshman were defined as those between the ages of 18-19. Former students were chosen who had been enrolled in classes for at least two weeks because questions concerning university life could yield more informative results from those who had some experience on their campus.

From the larger research institution, 10 students provided voluntary informed consent, and participated in the study. There were five females, including one African American, one Native American, and three Caucasians. Of the five male participants, four were Caucasian, and one was African American. The participants' high school grade point averages ranged from 2.2 to 3.98, and their ACT scores ranged from 19 to 32. From the smaller liberal arts university, 10 students also agreed to participate in the study. All 10 participants were Caucasian, including six females and four males. Their high school grade point averages ranged from 3.0 to 3.87, and their ACT scores ranged from 21-29.

Data Collection

The registrar's office from both universities sent out letters and consent forms to potential participants to maintain confidentiality for those who did not wish to participate. Once they returned signed consent forms, participants were assigned pseudonyms that were used in every aspect of the study. The participants completed an audio-taped interview that lasted an average of two hours. The first author conducted the interviews at the smaller liberal arts university, and the second author conducted the interviews at the larger research university. The semi-structured interview guide created for this study contained four sections of questions designed to gather data on the participants' educational and family backgrounds, their decisions to attend their university, their experiences at their university, and their decisions to withdraw. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Field notes were also recorded during the interviewing process. The participants' high school and university grade point averages, and ACT scores, were also gathered as a means of triangulating data types to provide more information about the participants.

Data Analysis

Following the grounded theory procedure, open, axial, and selective coding were conducted with the set of 20 transcribed interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the open coding process, each researcher read and coded the interviews individually, and then we met to discuss our coding until we reached agreement. During all of the coding stages, we utilized the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). For example, the larger axial category "lack of preparation" began as the individual open codes of "preparation concerns" and "untimely action". Preparation concerns were coded when the participants discussed that they felt unprepared for university academic work, studying strategies, and university life based on their high school experience. Untimely action was related by several participants who applied to their university late in the process, and they struggled to adjust to a quick transition to university life. As we examined the open codes, we saw these two codes as representing a larger conceptual category, which we named "lack of preparation". We then went back through all of the transcripts to record all of the instances of a lack of preparation, to develop the properties and dimensions of the category more completely.

All of the open codes were then examined to find whether individual codes could be combined into higher conceptual categories as a part of the axial coding process. Once these higher conceptual categories were developed, we examined each category's properties and dimensions. During axial coding, connections were made between the categories and their sub-categories through the process of considering the conditions, context, action and interaction processes, and the consequences of each category. Through the process of selective coding, the axial categories were then analyzed to investigate their relationships to each other across the participants' interviews. All three coding stages helped us develop the grounded theory concerning the participants' reasons for their early withdrawal from their universities.

After collecting and analyzing the 20 interviews, theoretical saturation had been achieved. Nine axial categories were developed from the data analysis, and two larger selective categories were developed to connect the axial categories. The axial categories included the conditions that impacted the participants' decisions to withdraw, the action and interaction processes that were involved when the participants were making their decisions, and the consequences of the conditions, and the action and interaction processes. The conditions that impacted the participants' withdrawal included the following categories: lack of preparation, adopted commitment, unmet expectations, and lack of institutional information. The action and interaction processes included non-persistence, socialization and adjustment difficulties, competing interests, low self-efficacy, and financial concerns. The larger selective categories included the absence of clear educational goals and distractions from educational goals. The grounded theory concerning the participants' attrition is related in the Discussion section by describing the relationship between the participants' absence of clear educational goals and the distractions from their educational goals. The categories are described throughout the Results and Discussion sections.

Reliability

Comparisons of the coding of the interviews were conducted by the authors, at each stage of the coding process, to establish an indication of the reliability of the emergent categories. This was done by having each researcher independently code the interviews. Then, we met to discuss our coding until we reached agreement by utilizing the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This was done at the open, axial, and selective coding stages. Member checking was also conducted by presenting the analysis and the results to the participants to establish whether the results represented their experiences. The completed written data analysis and results sections were sent to all of the participants to ask for their feedback. All but one of the participants provided feedback through the member-checking process. The participants who did respond confirmed that the analysis and the results did represent their overall experience.

Interrater reliability

Additionally, two faculty members with qualitative research experience, who were not involved in the study, served to establish a measure of interrater reliability of the nine axial categories. The external raters were given operational definitions and one example interview excerpt, for each category. Then, they rated 18 unmarked interview excerpts into the nine axial categories. The interview excerpts were placed on note cards so the raters could move them around until they placed them into the categories in which they thought the cards belonged. Significant interrater reliability was observed using Cohen's (1960) kappa coefficient (Kappa = .88, significant at .001).

Although using Cohen's kappa may be interpreted as more of a positivist notion of reliability, it has been documented as one means of establishing interrater reliability in qualitative research (Cohen, 1960; Conger, 1980). This technique may not be appropriate for all qualitative designs, but it does seem to fit with the specific coding strategy utilized in grounded theory. Cohen's kappa computes an interrater reliability coefficient, and it also factors out chance agreement, which is not addressed in pure percentage of agreement.

The goal of conducting the interrater reliability procedure was to ensure that the data analysis reflected the participants' data as accurately as possible. Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented the idea of stepwise replication, which involved utilizing multiple people to conduct a study. They described this process as similar to the positivist idea of replication. In this study, we utilized the idea of stepwise replication to examine how multiple raters interpreted qualitative information, and whether there was agreement among their interpretations.

Results

The interviews were analyzed by utilizing the grounded theory procedures of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The nine axial categories are presented, as they represented the conditions that precipitated the participants' actions, or lack of action, that eventually led to the consequence of withdrawing from their universities (See Table 1). The axial categories were represented in each of the

participants' interviews. Selected interview excerpts are presented to represent each category.

Table 1

Axial Categories from Participant Interviews

Conditions Leading to Withdrawal	Action/Interaction
Lack of Preparation -High school did not prepare them with studying and time-management skills. -Chose university late in the process.	**Non-Persistence** -Low class attendance. -Stopped participating in activities -Withdrew from more than 1 post-secondary institution.
Adopted Commitment -Adopted goals of teachers, counselors, parents, peers.	**Socialization/Adjustment Concerns** -Too many students-difficulty making friends. -Roommate issues. -Class scheduling difficulties.
Unmet Expectations -Large classes. -Thought they would easily make friends. -University life was not how they imagined it.	**Competing Interests** -Conflicting educational/career goals. -Working at a job. -Balancing roles as student, worker, bill payer.
Lack of Institutional Information -Lack of information about scheduling, orientation, housing.	**Low Self-Efficacy** -Felt they did not belong at the university. -Did not feel as intelligent as their university classmates.

Conditions Impacting Attrition

Lack of preparation

Several conditions began to set the stage for a negative outcome for the participants. Some of the conditions began even before the participants arrived on campus for their first semester. One of the axial categories involved the participants' lack of preparation for going to a university. The participants related having a lack of adequate high school preparation for university life and academics. The participants generally related that their high school classes were too easy, they had not learned effective studying skills in high school, and they lacked the time management skills needed to balance academics, working at a job, and social life. The participants also described their own lack of preparation, which included choosing a university late in the process, which made it difficult for many of the participants to adapt to university life.

Kelly, who was from the smaller university, described high school as a place where she hardly ever had to study. In fact, her senior year was described as a "blow-off, big time." She made "pretty good grades without having to work really hard" for them. Kelly exclaimed, "I don't think I was prepared in any way at all [for college]!" Sixteen times Kelly referred to feeling unprepared for university life. Kelly's strategy of choosing

a university also highlighted her lack of preparation, "It was the first choice, but I never knew why. I didn't study it. It was just, 'Oh, this looks like a fun place to go. I think I'll go there.' "

Brooke, from the larger university, also made six statements that were coded into the lack of preparation category. She explained that some of her high school classes did not help prepare her for college. She also indicated that her own "study habits could have used a lot of help."

John was accepted to two prestigious universities on the East Coast, as well as the larger university he chose. John stated that he really wanted to go to one of the other institutions, "...and at the last minute I changed my mind." John had actually applied to the participating university fairly early in the process, but in May he decided that he would attend one of the other institutions. Then, John changed his mind just one week before classes started. He was readmitted to the larger research university five days before classes began. John then enrolled in classes, and he moved into the residence halls the Friday before classes started. During his interview, John mentioned his own lack of preparation seven separate times.

Adopted commitment

Several of the participants related that they chose their university based on someone else's desire for them to go there, like a friend or a teacher. James Marcia discussed adopted commitment as identity foreclosure (1988). John stated that in his junior year of high school, his career goal was to become an airplane mechanic. However, he said, "During my senior year, my counselor and teachers talked me into going to college, and really, I didn't even know if I wanted to go to college." Ultimately, John decided that an engineering degree might offer him some of the "hands-on" experience similar to what he had hoped to find at an airplane mechanic's school.

Although Steve only provided one comment that related to the adopted commitment category, it was the key reason for his withdrawal from the larger university. Steve had originally planned to attend another university with a friend. His friend visited the participating university, and decided to enroll there. His friend encouraged Steve to enroll there as well. Steve revealed that among the factors he considered about where to attend college, "peer pressure was the main one, unfortunately."

Pete was also influenced by adopted commitment. He began to realize that he was only vicariously committed to his education at the larger university. Pete stated that he "went to school for completely the wrong reasons, because people expected me to. Everyone had told me that's what I should be doing. I felt forced into doing something I wasn't ready for."

The two people who were most instrumental in Tricia's decision to attend her university were a good friend, and her steady boyfriend, who "convinced [her] to go there." A total of four statements were coded into the adopted commitment category by this participant from the smaller university. Tricia never indicated a strong sense of personal commitment, or her own educational goals, when she was choosing a university. Adopted commitment appeared to be the major factor influencing her decision, which eventually led to her withdrawal.

Unmet expectations

Several participants reported that the expectations they had about their university, or university life, were not met when they moved on campus. Eight times Dave expressed that his expectations were not met at the larger university, "Nothing here was like I expected it at all, if I even expected anything."

Mary had high social expectations when she went to the larger research university. Mary related 33 different statements describing how her expectations were not met, either during high school or at the university, including

> And I'm kind of an outgoing person, and I was like "Oh, I'm going to meet people! This is like Mecca!" you know, so I would talk to people... and they were just like "hi" [unenthusiastically]. I was like, well that's kind of weird.

Sue's older brother was a senior at the larger university. Even though she was aware of his experiences, this did not prepare Sue for university life. Six of Sue's statements were coded as unmet expectations. For example,

> It was overwhelming, I guess is a good word. I mean, everybody says the classes are so big, and I didn't expect them to be. I mean, I figured maybe 30 to 40 people, but when I got in there, I had over 300 people in my class, and I was just like, "Wow!" It kinda blew me away.

Lack of institutional information

Another condition that the participants reported was that they did not receive adequate information from their university concerning enrollment, orientation, and residence halls. Some of the participants applied to their university late in the process, which may have impacted amount of information they received. A lack of institutional information was related by more of the participants from the larger university than from the smaller one. Anne, felt it was difficult to get information from her university, "Information is so hard to obtain, and no one seems to want to help us stay in school. It's kind of almost like they are trying to see if you'll quit or not."

Greg made 17 significant statements about the larger university that were coded into the lack of institutional information category. Greg's concerns related mostly to his scheduling difficulties, and the advice provided by his mentor. Greg related that he felt betrayed by his mentor, who gave him an "F" after he withdrew from a course instead of the "W" that he thought he was going to receive. "They lied to me...I think they screwed me over, not that I have anything against the school, it's just [his] department."

Mary, from the larger university, was adamant that she did not receive the information that could have helped her become ready for the beginning of school.

> And I had no idea about it [orientation] because I didn't get any mail. Actually, I didn't even know when we could move into the dorms. I never received any of that, so I was starting to look down on the university.

Eight of Mary's comments were categorized into the lack of institutional information category.

Action and Interaction Processes Influencing Attrition

Action and interaction may involve acts to resolve a problem. This may include interactions among people that influence self-reflection, like weighing the pros and cons to make a decision. These actions or interactions could be based on routines or habits, regulations, or the influence of others (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The axial categories that represented action and interaction processes included non-persistence, socialization and adjustment difficulties, competing interests, low self-efficacy, and financial concerns.

Non-persistence

A lack of persistence was reported by most of the participants as a key factor that led to their withdrawal. Some of the participants had a history of not persisting, and others had developed a lack of persistence after enrolling in their university. Katie described having a long history of a lack of persistence.

> Then I quit doing that [drama team], then I got back into it, and then I quit doing it. It was kind of a mess. And I used to sing on the worship team, then I quit doing that. I kind of used to have this thing where I quit doing stuff, that's kind of how it ended up at the [larger] university.

Katie related her feelings concerning her lack of persistence, "It's embarrassing. I didn't try very hard and I gave up. [People would think] I'm kind of a loser because I didn't give it my whole shot." In all, Katie provided 17 statements that exemplified non-persistence.

Lori provided six statements that related to a lack of persistence, and she indicated that after she "withdrew from the [smaller] university, [she] enrolled in a community college, but that was not a good experience either." She withdrew from the community college as well.

Greg made 10 statements that were coded as non-persistence. These were manifested primarily in the areas of limited follow-through and poor class attendance at the larger institution.

> Wednesdays started at 7:30 and didn't end until 5:30, and I had a real problem sticking with a full day. And so usually I'd drop that last class out of the day. You know there were four out of five classes that were questionable for attendance, so that's when my mentor told me to withdraw, so I took her advice.

Socialization and adjustment difficulties

The category of socialization and adjustment difficulties was prevalent among the interviews. The participants related a lack of adjustment to the social life at their

universities, and a few of them described a lack of adjustment to academic life as well. Socialization and adjustment difficulty was one of the key categories for Danny as he mentioned it 13 times. Danny's social experience at the smaller university was summarized.

> I didn't know a whole lot of people, so I stayed in my room. There wasn't a whole lot for me to do. I was like, okay, I'm bored. What can I do? I don't want to sit here in my room.

One of the problems with Danny's socialization into university life was that his original roommate of choice did not get accepted to his university. He therefore "went potluck" and roomed with a student from a different region of the country. He stated that the situation "was very awkward. We did not get along at all. It was just a personality clash."

Paula related that two of her best friends moved away, and she exclaimed that her reaction was, "Oh gosh, I'm gonna die!" Talking about moving into the residence halls, she stated, "Everywhere I go [at home] I have family there, or good friends. I always have liked that comfort zone. Moving out of my house with all my stuff was probably a big move for me." In fact, 26 of Paula's statements related to the socialization and adjustment difficulties that she encountered at the smaller institution.

Steve's schedule was not compact, which had him spending 10 to 12 hours per day on campus at the larger university. This amount of time, and the fact that he had not established meaningful connections, appeared to highlight his lack of socialization development on campus.

> In a 12-hour day, I saw maybe two people I knew, and that was briefly. And I'm a real people person. I've got to have my people around me, or I get bored really quick. Every single person that I saw that I knew kept getting further and further [removed]. I was non-existent. Nobody even knew if I was attending there, nobody even knew when I quit, because no one ever saw me.

The schedule that Kevin created at the larger institution, which he claimed was due to limited class availability, was what he primarily blamed for his early departure. "I think it was mostly the schedule, because I have problems scheduling my time, as most creative people do, you know, with organization and stuff." Thirteen of Kevin's statements were coded into this category. Unlike some of the other participants who had difficulty adjusting socially, Kevin had more difficulty adjusting to his responsibility as a student.

Competing interests

Competing interests included aspects of the participants' lives outside of the classroom that interfered with their academic work and their adjustment to their university. Lisa related that her job was interfering with her classes at the smaller university, "I had classes at all different times, and I'm working nights, and I just thought 'What the heck! How am I going to do this?'"

Although John seemed to adjust to university life more than the others, competing interests would ultimately lead to John's complete withdrawal. John did admit that he was not doing as well as he could academically, and that he was behind on some of his assignments. However, his motivation seemed to be lacking because he had never forgotten his original goal of becoming an airplane mechanic.

> Basically, I just realized that it was really, that college was really complicated. My junior year in high school I always wanted to do something hands-on. I finally figured out that my original plans were right. I eventually figured out that college wasn't for me. Now I plan to go to [airplane mechanics school] in January.

Gene indicated that in the middle of his first semester he became overwhelmed with his responsibilities as a student, worker, and bill-payer at the smaller institution. "I don't know how to juggle my time that way. I'm not talented enough to do that." This struggle led to a "mental breakdown." He realized that he "was not going to make it." These statements exemplified the categories of competing interests, socialization and adjustment difficulties, and low self-efficacy.

Low self-efficacy

Self-efficacy can be described as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Some of the participants related low self-efficacy concerning their ability to complete adequate academic work in their classes. Missy related that she "felt dumb sitting in that class." Nine times in the interview Missy related that she experienced low self-efficacy at the larger university.

> I think everyone else knows what they're doing, and I don't want them to think I don't know what I'm doing, so I think I'll just sit here. Maybe after class when everybody else is gone, I'll go ask her [the instructor] a question, so that everybody's not like, well 'what are *you* doing here' kind of thing.

As Jim realized that the smaller university was not what he expected, and that he was not adapting to this new environment, he began to lose his confidence. Five of Jim's statements were coded into the low self-efficacy category. Jim stated that he needed "to be more comfortable being there." He indicated that "I finally withdrew because I could feel myself pulling away from school and not focusing. I could feel myself kind of slacking. I just don't think I was ready to be there yet."

Financial concerns

The cost of a university education continues to rise. However, financial concerns were only mentioned a few times during the study. Katie felt that the larger university was very expensive, that scholarships and financial aid were hard to get, and that the

financial aid staff were not very helpful. She was frustrated that her dad's income was considered in the funding formula, especially since she reported that she was paying the entire cost, "And I had to work because I was paying for my own school, because my parents weren't helping me out, and that is stressful." Katie mentioned financial concerns 10 times during her interview.

Although she made only three statements in reference to financial concerns, Mary had strong feelings about the lack of value she was receiving from the larger university, "If I'm paying all this money for it, I should get what I want and I didn't." Mary stated, "My math instructor used the same book I had in the seventh grade, and course was the easiest class I've ever taken in my life. That was a waste of money."

Financial concerns were also an issue for Steve as he made 13 statements regarding finances. Steve expected to receive a "full-ride" scholarship at the larger university, but he just barely missed receiving it. He was offered only $2,000 for his first year which he claimed,

> That ain't squat. I had no business going there. I should have gone to where I wanted to go. They would have given me practically a full-ride. But I figured I could make it, stay close, do everything cheap, like I've always done. But they robbed me blind! Every time I thought I was doing good on money, another fee popped up from out of nowhere. I mean, they charged me $500 to withdraw.

Consequences

During this study, the participants provided an in-depth look into the reasons they withdrew from their universities during their first year. Eighteen of the participants had strong academic predictors that they could have succeeded in university classrooms, and the other two had at least average to above-average predictors of potential success. Academic issues and difficulties did not appear to be major factors in these withdrawals, rather the predominant factors affecting early withdrawal appeared to be personal and institutional. It is not clear whether these students have withdrawn for good or not. Most of the participants indicated that they had plans to continue their education in the future. However, they related that their goals were still unclear at the end of this study.

Selective Coding and Grounded Theory Development

During the selective coding process, all of the axial categories were reviewed to determine the connections between them, to generate the grounded theory that emerged during this study. The conditions, action and interaction, and the consequences were examined during this selective coding process. Two comprehensive selective categories emerged that connected sets of the axial categories: (1) absence of clear educational goals and (2) distraction from educational goals. The selective categories helped explain the reasons for the participants' attrition during this study. According to the participants, the reasons for their withdrawal essentially revolved around the absence of clear educational goals and being distracted by personal and institutional factors.

The absence of clear educational goals was represented by the categories dealing mainly with individual factors that impacted attrition such as a lack of preparation, adopted commitment, non-persistence, and low self-efficacy. Distractions from educational goals included both individual and institutional factors that impeded the participants from continuing their education, such as competing interests, socialization and adjustment difficulties, unmet expectations, a lack of institutional information, and financial concerns (See Table 2).

Table 2

Selective Categories Representing Grounded Theory

Absence of Clear Educational Goals	Distractions from Educational Goals
●Lack of Preparation	●Competing Interests
●Adopted Commitment	●Socialization and Adjustment Concerns
●Non-Persistence	●Unmet Expectations
●Low Self-Efficacy	●Lack of Institutional Information
	●Financial Concerns

Discussion

The relationship between the larger selective categories provided the grounded theory that emerged during this study concerning early attrition of traditional university freshmen. The participants related a general absence of clear educational goals. The participants reported feeling unprepared for university life. They stated that their high schools had not prepared them with adequate studying or time management skills. Several of the participants also applied to their university late, which left them with little time to prepare for life on campus. Several students reported adopted commitment as they may have chosen to go to their university because of someone else's desire for them to go there. The participants demonstrated a lack of persistence in their academic work, like not attending classes on a regular basis. Several participants related feeling low self-efficacy. These participants believed that they did not belong at the university because they did not feel they were as intelligent as their university classmates.

The participants also related being distracted from educational goals. Competing interests distracted the participants from their role as students. The participants found it difficult to balance their academic, occupational, and social lives. The participants related having a difficult time adjusting to the social atmosphere at their universities. They reported that it was difficult to establish friendships among so many students. They may have also had roommate, romantic, or family difficulties that hindered their social adjustment to their university. The participants related that some of their expectations about their universities were not met, which may have included social, academic, or institutional expectations. Some participants also related that they did not receive enough information or communication from their institution regarding registration, scheduling, orientation, and housing. A few participants were also concerned with the financial cost of their education.

The selective categories could be viewed as opposing weights on a scale, with educational goals on one side and distractions on the other side. As long as the

establishment of clear educational goals outweighs the competing distractions from these goals, persistence should be the result. When distractions overcome educational goals, attrition would be the expected outcome. The participants generally showed a lack of commitment to their educational goals, and they were often overwhelmed by personal and institutional distractions, both of which were reported to influence their ultimate withdrawal.

Contribution to the Attrition Literature

The interview categories that were generated from this study were congruent with, and extended, previous research and theory on university attrition. However, none of the individual research studies reviewed depicted precisely the same attrition categories in a single study that developed from this grounded theory study.

The selective categories concerning the absence of clear educational goals, and the distraction from educational goals, were supported by Tinto's (1993) description of attrition risks, such as the individual attributes of intention and commitment as well as the institutional attributes of adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Napoli and Workman (1998) specifically mentioned early goal commitment as a factor that related to persistence. Several of the external influences such as parental, peer, teacher or counselor influences, and financial concerns were supported by Bean's Student Attrition Model (1982, 1985).

Limitations

One of the limitations in this study was the response rate of former students. At the larger university, there were 27 eligible former students who withdrew during the first semester, who still lived within the state, and 10 of those people participated. From the smaller institution, there were 15 eligible former students, and 10 of those people participated. Overall, the interviews from the larger university provided more data than those from the smaller university. The participants were interviewed only once due to time and travel constraints. Further information may have been gathered with additional interviews. Also, only the former students were interviewed, which was the intent of the study, but interviewing parents or school officials may have provided further information for the study.

Implications

During this study, the participants related both personal and institutional barriers that impacted their decisions to voluntarily withdraw from their university. Preparation concerns were discussed that would suggest changes in both high school and university practices. Many participants felt ill-prepared for the challenges of university-level courses, although only a few of them noted academic issues as primary factors in withdrawal decisions. However, the participants' lack of preparation often included poor studying and time management skills. Those skills could be addressed at the secondary level in a number of ways. Post-secondary institutions could also assist in these areas.

However, it is questionable that the participating universities could have had a quick enough impact to avoid these students' early withdrawal.

It appears that the initial days or weeks of a student's experience at a university are key to retention. Early negative experiences, frustrations, or alienation seemed to be key reasons for the participants' withdrawal in this study. There are concrete steps institutions can take to avoid many of these problems. While most universities, like the ones in this study, do have some freshman orientation programming, more could be done in this area. Simple steps like communicating more effectively with incoming students, assisting with scheduling, and pairing incoming students with mentor faculty and students, to help make the university a less impersonal place, might make a difference in attrition among students such as the participants in this study.

Conclusion

Eighteen out of the 20 participants in this study would not have been identified as being at-risk for university withdrawal based on their high school grades and ACT scores. However, they all did withdraw during their first year. The results from this study indicate that statistical predictors of university attrition and retention are not always accurate. By investigating the reasons for students' decisions to withdraw, this study has provided much needed qualitative information about the personal and institutional factors that went into the participants' decisions to withdraw from their universities.

The grounded theory that was developed from this study indicated that the participants had not established clear educational goals including a lack of preparation, adopted commitment, non-persistence, and low self-efficacy. The participants were also distracted from their educational goals by competing interests, socialization and adjustment concerns, unmet expectations, a lack of sufficient information from their institutions, and financial concerns. These findings may inspire both secondary and post-secondary educators to strengthen or develop programs and policies that will help students avoid the outcomes experienced by the participants in this study.

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Article Citation