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# **Student Attrition: Factors and Possible Ways of Management in Private Higher Education Institutions**

By

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## **Abstract**

*Student attrition is a universal problem in the academic arena. It has both educational and cost implications. Education is meant to produce competent citizens in various disciplines based on societal needs. Greater attrition rate implies missing the target of education that meant to meet. This study is done to find out the extent and causes of attrition in St. Mary's University College and suggest possible remedies thereof. In so doing, a mixed approach to analytical research that entertains both qualitative and quantitative techniques was employed.*

*The main data sources for the study were students who experienced poor academic performance in the period referred herein. To supplement/complement the data obtained from students, department heads, faculty deans, documents from the Registrar, and Student Affairs Office, and relevant literature were also explored and used to substantiate the findings of the study. For the gathering of qualitative data, convenient sampling technique was used.*

*Eleven suspended students and three department heads and three deans were interviewed by posing various unstructured, semi-structured, and structured open-ended questions. The study tried to illicit their perceptions through in-depth interviews. A total of 213 students who were readmitted in the first semester of the year 2001 were asked to complete a questionnaire prepared for them. Out of this, 67 (31.5%) responded.*

*The study, by and large, indicated that student attrition is a problem sufficient to draw managerial attention in the institution. The attributable factors are linked to the various areas of the learning process. Thus, tackling student attrition can not be taken as a unilateral activity. There is interdependence of factors that work in favor of student drop out. It has to be seen in a holistic approach by paying attention to individual differences and tackling every problem in the teaching-learning process that contributes to student attrition.*

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## **Introduction**

Student attrition is a universal problem in the academic arena. It has both educational and cost implications. Education is meant to produce competent citizens in various

disciplines based on societal needs. Greater attrition rate implies missing the target planned to be achieved through education. Higher dropout rate may contribute to social problem via limiting the job opportunity for the dropouts (Woods, 1995). Thus, providing quality education<sup>4</sup> by providing an enabling environment for learners is a concern for all academic institutions.

Given the various implications of student attrition both on the students and the institution, some attempts have been made to identify students' attrition rate in SMUC. The result of those informal assessments indicated that the prevalence and uneven distribution of student attrition across departments is worrying. Cognizant of its potential threats, the University College expressed its concern about the matter, and required in-depth investigation on the issue.

### **Scope of the Study**

With the focus on degree offering departments that exhibited high or low attrition rates such as Management, Marketing Management, Accounting, and Informatics, the study covers both the regular and extension programmes. The survey time of the study was the academic year 2001 with reference to the students currently enrolled in the above programs at all the campuses of the UC.

### **Objectives**

The general objective of the study is to explore the level of attrition so as to come up with reliable information on the prevalence of attrition as a problem, the possible causes and remedial suggestions that would enable an informed decision and policy making in private higher education in general and in the case of SMUC in particular.

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<sup>4</sup> Quality of education refers to the quality of student learning itself both the extent to which the institution provides an environment conducive to student learning, and the extent to which the environment leads to the development of knowledge and skills (CEIRQA, 2006).

The specific objectives are to identify:

- current level of student attrition;
- factors that contributed to student attrition; and,
- Possible options of measures that can be taken to curb the problem.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The research was designed to be an exploratory case study targeting St. Mary's University College, and followed a mixed approach that entertained both qualitative and quantitative techniques of analyses. Such methodological approaches to research are primarily influenced by the nature of the research objectives which require not only measuring the prevalence of the presumed phenomena but also exploration and in-depth analysis of unforeseen elements making up the phenomena.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Sources and Tools**

The main data sources for the study were students who experienced difficulty in learning achievement, thereby prone to attrition in the period referred herein. They were primary sources and treated with a questionnaire incorporating both open- and close-ended questions, and a semi-structured interview which was meant to complement with more of qualitative data. Attempts made to incorporate students who were victims of the problem and were not readmitted failed as the phone calls made to trace them were not successful.

However, to diversify the sources for the purpose of triangulation and thereby ensure consistency of data quality, department heads and faculty deans were interviewed,

while documents from Offices of the Registrar, Student Affairs and other relevant secondary sources were explored.

### **Method**

To acquire primary data, convenient sampling technique was used. Eleven suspended students, three Department Heads and three Faculty Deans were interviewed by using semi-structured checklists. A total of 213 students who were readmitted in the first semester of the year 2001 were given to complete a questionnaire and, 67 (31.5%) of which returned the completed ones.

Documents were reviewed to look at secondary data on, among others, the reason for withdrawal; and the academic backgrounds and performances at the University College of those students who withdrew in the academic years, 1998, 1999, and 2000.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were processed and analyzed using SPSS software where statistical indicators such as measures of central tendency, dispersion and proportion were used to interpret the results. In the analysis of qualitative data, attempt was made to obtain the participants' perspectives, and interpret and describe the recurring ideas of respondents.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Student Attrition: Concept, Causes and Consequences**

There are several challenges higher learning institutions face in the process of instruction; one of which is student attrition. Student attrition can be defined as termination or withdrawal from an educational program run by a given academic institution. The California Postsecondary Education Commission defines student attrition as 'Students that leave or dropout prior to completion of their education

program include students who are delayed in their progress toward program completion' (Seago and Spitz in Kennedy et al, 2007). Thus, dropping out from a program as well as delay from the required time of completion is considered as attrition.

Student attrition has a radiating effect that could reach almost everywhere from the individual to the family, then to the community at large. A study conducted in South Africa indicated that 35.0% to 40.0% of student attrition was registered in the various tertiary institutions of the country which is much higher than the internationally acceptable rate of 10.0% (Gouws & Wolmaran, 2002).

Student attrition remains to be a problem even in the developed nations. Another study which was carried out in Australia over the years 1994 to 2002 indicated that there is variability across the institutions, but the first year students attrition rate was over 20.0% across all the years; while for the second year the attrition rate for these students was around 10.0% to 11.0%.

Studies carried out in the US (see for instance, Arndt 1994; Asche 1993; General Accounting Office, 1987 in Woods, 1995) indicated that increased attrition rate has the following consequences:

- As the pool of dropouts continues to grow, employment opportunities for them are more limited, because today's economy requires increased literacy of the labor force, more education, enhanced technological skills, and lifelong learning.
- The rate of engagement in high-risk behaviors such as premature sexual activity, early pregnancy, delinquency, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide has been found to be significantly higher among dropouts.
- Dropouts are more likely than other citizens to draw on welfare and other social programs throughout their lives.

- Income differences between dropouts and other citizens can be expected to widen as the economy evolves, "pitting Americans with less education against computerized machines and people in low-wage nations".
- A growth of unskilled laborers in low-wage jobs will increase the trend toward developing a large American underclass which "some analysts argue...threatens the continuing existence of a democratic way of life"..

Thus, higher learning institutions in general need to ponder on the issue to seek solutions since the problem of student dropout has both economic and social implications for countries, institutions, families and individuals.

Various factors are cited as causes for student attrition in various contexts including SMUC. Kassahun (2007) identified financial problem, academic failure, lack of study and note taking skills, lack of guidance and counseling services, grading system, frequent absenteeism from classes, large class size and, unstable working conditions of employee students as major causes of student attrition at SMUC

On the other hand, Tinto pinpointed five contributing factors to student attrition: (1) a student's pre-entry attributes (prior schooling and family background); (2) goals and commitment (the student's individual aspirations in the institution); (3) experience at the institution (academics and faculty and peer interactions); (4) external commitments while at the institution; (5) integration both academically and socially (Metz 4) (Tinto 1987 in Hald, undated).

Students' background has also impact on their academic performance. Fantew (2001) indicated that the retention rate of female quota students is less than that of the regular entrants by 10%.

## **Student Retention Mechanisms**

According to Education Encyclopedia, student retention occurs when a student enrolls each semester until graduation, studies full-time, and graduates in the specified time for the specific program. Many institutions design retention mechanisms by identifying students at risk of attrition. Among such mechanisms, learning community is one.

Learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses – or actually restructure the curricular material entity – so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning (Gabelnick, et al in Kilpatrick et al, 2003)

A study indicated that in Temple University the retention rate for learning community participant students was higher than that of the non-participants by 5-8% (Levine & Dagnan, 2000). The California University has used learning communities to increase the retention rate. This is apparent as the evaluation report of the university stated that, “We find that participation in a learning community increases the first year retention rate by four percentage points on average” (Fairris et al, 2006).

According to Krause (2008) the retention program should have dual focus: retention and persistence, because a student who persists is more likely to be self-regulated in learning and coping styles. An empirical research report on teaching mathematics to low achieving students indicated that a variety of intervention actions led to improvements. These included: providing teachers and students with data on student performance, using peers as tutors or instructional guides, and providing clear, specific feedback to parents. Here, the intervention action incorporates the immediacy of feedback to the student. The data provision leads to advising and counseling as needed by individual student.



The other commonly known mechanism of student retention is counseling and advisory service. Literatures indicate that a student gets difficulty in identifying the field of study that he/she can make the maximum benefit by exploiting his/her potential (Brooks, 2003). In this regard, the student will be a victim of any one around who wants to decide on his/her behalf.

A student may lack appropriate counseling that he/she should get from mentors who could be parents, relatives, teachers, etc. In such a situation, the student will be susceptible to missing her/his target. Goal setting is also very important in learning in that it enhances the students' motivation to achieve that goal (Elliott et al, 2000). However, it is very difficult for the student to crave to achieve goals set for him/her by others. As a result, the student may not be successful. Generally, peers as well as parents are the main actors in the decision of students' choice (Brooks, 2003).

In the counseling process, the different university staff involved such as counselors & instructors need to know their jobs properly. For instance, the student should not be prescribed but understood by the counseling instructor. After all, the final decision is left for the student provided that appropriate advice and information are forwarded. As a result, students' academic problems can be curbed early.

There are also career consultants that help students in relation to decision on preparation for jobs. According to the University of Tokyo, career consultants provide students with support in career counseling. Career consultants are professionals who help students prepare for their desired career and find appropriate work placements. They guide students through the steps for determining and achieving goals, and assist them in finding the best choice from the appropriate job openings.

Academic Advising is another important component of the retention mechanism. It has been acclaimed by many writers as an essential component in the retention of

undergraduate students (Crockett, 1985; Habley, 1981; Tinto, 1987 in Metzner, 1989).

High quality Advising can help students in many respects:

- Offers the potential of linking students goal with institutional resources on a personalized basis;
- Can help students clarify their educational goals and relate these goals to the curriculum and future careers;
- Encourage academic success by assisting students with the selection of course work that is compatible with their interests, abilities, outside commitments, and career aspirations;
- Facilitates referral to other services and programs at the institution;
- Establishes a personal bond between a student and personnel of college.

According to Metzner (1989), academic advising can also have indirect influence on retention – it may influence his/her perception on college education which, in turn, can affect retention. As a result the student will be productive in both academic performance and preparation for career.

A typical example of academic advising is that of the department of curriculum and instruction of the University of Wisconsin. The department believes that effective advisors exhibit such general characteristics as availability in contact hours, knowledge of programs and procedures, responsiveness to student concerns, and helpfulness and appropriate assistance. The ideal advisor will enable the student to make appropriate decision in adding courses that maximizes his chance of retention. He/she is evaluated for appropriate advising.

## **Some Issues about Low Achievers**

Literature on underachievement suggests that underachievers have low self-perceptions, low self-motivation and self-regulation, and less goal directed behavior and more negative attitudes towards school.

In a study made in a secondary school in the US, it was found out that academic self-perceptions, attitude toward school, attitude toward teachers, motivation/ self-regulation, and goal evaluation are factors associated with underachievers. Though the cause-effect relationship of the above factors remains to be investigated, low academic self-perceptions and low motivation/self-regulation are found to be causes for low academic achievements (McCoach & Seigle, 2001).

According to Reddy & Ramar (2003), some of their students which make up 18 percent of the total school population could be slow learners. They claim that slow learners have limited scope for achievement, don't stand out as very different from their classmates except that they are slow on uptake and often teased by other students because of their slowness. Although much of the work is too difficult for them, they are patient & cooperative.

Slow learners can, actually, be helped. According to Singh (2004), improving teacher & student attitudes through in-service trainings and appropriate counseling are important in alleviating the problems of slow learners (pp. 185).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Characteristics of Respondents**

As indicated in Table 3 and 4, the study covered a total of 80 students who were reached through the self-completion questionnaire (67) and the interview (13). A large proportion of the respondents (34.4%) who completed the questionnaire were students of Management Department. In terms of sex, female students constitute over 58.0% of

the respondents' population. With respect to mode of study, the majority of them were from the extension division (69.0%). Regarding their employment status, nearly 76.0% were found to have jobs (permanent or part-time), and the rest (24.2%) reported that they were not employed at all.

Table 3: Respondents to self-completion questionnaire by department/faculty

| Department       | Number | Percentage | Year of Readmission |
|------------------|--------|------------|---------------------|
| Accounting       | 17     | 25.4       | 2001 E.C            |
| Computer science | 9      | 13.4       | 2001 E.C            |
| Law              | 9      | 13.4       | 2001 E.C            |
| Management       | 23     | 34.3       | 2001 E.C            |
| Marketing        | 9      | 13.4       | 2001 E.C            |
| Total            | 67     | 100.0%     |                     |

Unlike the case of students who completed the questionnaire, the number of regular and extension students who were interviewed is almost equal – 6 and 7, respectively.

In addition to students, a total of 7 SMUC staff took part in the study as respondents. This include: 3 Faculty Deans, 3 Department Heads and 1 staff from the student affairs office.

### **Prevalence of Student Attrition**

The aggregate attrition rate observed at SMUC in the year 2000 E.C is 13.2%. The data presented in table 6 indicate that student attrition is more prevalent in the regular division (14.9%) than the extension division (12.8%). Marketing management students are the most affected groups both in the cases of the regular (25.7%) and extension (14.7%) divisions.

Table 6: Attrition among 1997 - 2000 E.C entrants in the regular & extension divisions

| Department       | Number of Students |             | Number of dropouts |            | Percentage of the Total |             |
|------------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------|------------|-------------------------|-------------|
|                  | Regular            | Extension   | Regular            | Extension  | Regular                 | Extension   |
| Accounting       | 179                | 1096        | 17                 | 140        | 9.5                     | 12.7        |
| Computer science | 104                | 166         | 26                 | 24         | 25.0                    | 14.5        |
| Faculty of law   | 151                | 285         | 6                  | 25         | 4.0                     | 8.7         |
| Management       | 140                | 815         | 25                 | 108        | 17.9                    | 13.2        |
| Marketing        | 105                | 312         | 27                 | 46         | 25.7                    | 14.7        |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>679</b>         | <b>2674</b> | <b>101</b>         | <b>343</b> | <b>14.9</b>             | <b>12.8</b> |

Source: Academic Vice President Office, SMUC

### Factors of attrition

#### Students' Academic Background

Students are admitted to public universities when they score a point which is set by the MOE. Regardless of the variation in the cutting line for entrance point across the years, most students joining private HEIs are thought to be those who failed to join the public HEIs.

Some instructors think that students' poor performance in SMUC is usually because of their academic background. This could be apparent from one Department Head's response which reads: *'Many of the students admitted in our university college are those who are not competent enough to get admission into the public universities. Thus, attrition should be viewed from this perspective too'*.

The data presented in table 9 confirms the Department Head's observation. A significant proportion of students who withdrew both in 1999 (70.7%) and 2000 (56.4%) were those who had low entrance point upon joining SMUC (that is,  $\leq 200$ ). In fact, the proportion of students with preparatory background is smaller – 24%.

Table 9: Entrance Point of Students who withdrew in 1999 and 2000 E.C.

| Entrance Grade | 1999 E.C  |         | 2000 E.C  |         |
|----------------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
|                | Frequency | Percent | Frequency | Percent |
| <125           | 1         | 2.4     | 2         | 2.6     |
| 126-150        | 6         | 14.6    | 9         | 11.5    |
| 151-175        | 11        | 26.8    | 18        | 23.1    |
| 176-200        | 12        | 29.3    | 15        | 19.2    |
| 201-225        | 4         | 9.8     | 12        | 15.4    |
| 226-250        | 4         | 9.8     | 12        | 15.4    |
| 251-275        | 2         | 4.9     | 6         | 7.7     |
| 276-300        | 1         | 2.4     | 2         | 2.6     |
| >300           | 0         | 0.0     | 2         | 2.6     |
| Total          | 41        | 100.0   | 78        | 100.0   |

Source: Registrar office, SMUC

In congruence with the above argument, table 10 shows that the majority of students who joined SMUC with low entrance point also scored a low GPA ( $\leq 2.00$ ) at SMUC.

Table 10: Entrance point for preparatory versus GPAs obtained at SMUC (% within entrance): The case of students who withdrew in 2000 E.C

| Entrance Point | GPA at SMUC |           |           |           |           |             | Total |
|----------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------|
|                | $\leq 1.00$ | 1.01-1.50 | 1.51-2.00 | 2.01-2.50 | 2.51-3.00 | $\geq 3.01$ |       |
| <125           |             |           | 2(100.0%) |           |           |             | 2     |
| 126-150        |             | 2(25.0%)  | 5(62.5%)  | 1(12.5%)  |           |             | 8     |
| 151-175        |             | 2(11.1%)  | 16(88.9%) |           |           |             | 18    |
| 176-200        | 1(6.7%)     | 2(13.3%)  | 9(60.0%)  | 2(13.3%)  |           | 1(6.7%)     | 15    |
| 201-225        | 1(8.3%)     | 3(25.0%)  | 5(41.7%)  | 1(8.3%)   | 1(8.3%)   | 1(8.3%)     | 12    |
| 226-250        | 1(10.0%)    | 1(10.0%)  | 7(70.0%)  | 1(10.0%)  |           |             | 10    |
| 251-275        |             | 2(40.0%)  | 2(40.0%)  | 1(20.0%)  |           |             | 5     |
| 276-300        |             |           | 1(100.0%) |           |           |             | 1     |
| >300           |             |           | 1(100.0%) |           |           |             | 1     |
| Total          | 3(4.2%)     | 12(16.7%) | 48(66.7%) | 6(8.3%)   | 1(1.4%)   | 2(2.8%)     | 72    |

The study evidenced that most of the students who withdrew in the year 2000 (76.8%) were graduates of diploma program. Out of the 239 students who had diploma when

they joined SMUC for undergraduate degree, only 31.0 % managed to score a CGPA of 2.51 and above up on completion of their diploma (Table 11a).

Table 11: Cumulative GPAs upon completion of diploma program for students withdrew in 2000

| Entrance Grade Interval | Frequency  | Percent      | Cumulative Percent |
|-------------------------|------------|--------------|--------------------|
| <=2.00                  | 80         | 33.5         | 33.5               |
| 2.01-2.50               | 85         | 35.6         | 69.0               |
| 2.51-3.00               | 60         | 25.1         | 94.1               |
| >=3.00                  | 14         | 5.9          | 100.0              |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>239</b> | <b>100.0</b> |                    |

Table 11: Cumulative GPAs upon completion of diploma program versus GPA at SMUC upon withdrawal in 2000 E.C. (% within entrance GPA at diploma level)

| Entrance GPA | GPA at withdrawal from the degree program |           |           |           |           |        | Total  |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------|--------|
|              | <=1.00                                    | 1.01-1.50 | 1.51-2.00 | 2.01-2.50 | 2.51-3.00 | >=3.01 |        |
| <=2.00       | 5.1%                                      | 12.8%     | 62.8%     | 14.1%     | 2.6%      | 2.6%   | 100.0% |
| 2.01-2.50    | 2.4%                                      | 12.2%     | 51.2%     | 22.0%     | 6.1%      | 6.1%   | 100.0% |
| 2.51-3.00    | 3.4%                                      | 8.6%      | 34.5%     | 24.1%     | 15.5%     | 13.8%  | 100.0% |
| >=3.00       |                                           |           | 38.5%     | 30.8%     | 15.4%     | 15.4%  | 100.0% |
| Total        | 3.5%                                      | 10.8%     | 50.2%     | 20.3%     | 7.8%      | 7.4%   | 100.0% |

Thus, one can state that those students whose scores were poor at diploma or at preparatory level withdraw for academic reason.

### Assessment and Grading

Students complain about the grading system of the University College claiming that it is difficult to meet when compared to other similar institutions. An excerpt from a student's interview exemplifies this fact: *"We have information about grading system of other colleges. The grading system here is worse"*.

This view which is strongly held by students in the interview is shared by one Department Head. The following is what he said: *'The university college's grading system is very tough. There should be some mechanism of revising the regulation.*

*Especially, for senior students and graduating students... it has economic implication for the individual as well as for the country’.*

Documentary sources indicating the percentages of withdrawal cases in the academic years 2000, 1999, and 1998 E.C, whose CGPAs are below 2.00, were found to be 63.3, 62.8 and 63.3%, respectively (Table 12). Thus, academic failure is the main reason for withdrawal in all the three years examined.

Table 12 The CGPAs of students who withdrew in 1998, 1999, & 2000 E.C.

| GPA       | 1998 E.C  |         | 1999 E.C  |         | 2000 E.C  |         |
|-----------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
|           | Frequency | Percent | Frequency | Percent | Frequency | Percent |
| <=1.00    | 13        | 4.1     | 23        | 5.1     | 11        | 2.7     |
| 1.01-1.50 | 48        | 15.1    | 59        | 13.0    | 44        | 10.9    |
| 1.51-2.00 | 161       | 50.8    | 227       | 50.0    | 218       | 54.2    |
| 2.01-2.50 | 53        | 16.7    | 96        | 21.1    | 77        | 19.2    |
| 2.51-3.00 | 27        | 8.5     | 38        | 8.4     | 27        | 6.7     |
| >=3.01    | 15        | 4.7     | 11        | 2.4     | 25        | 6.2     |
| Total     | 317       | 100.0   | 454       | 100.0   | 402       | 100.0   |

**Source:** Registrar Office, SMUC

Data from students, who were readmitted to the University College, in the first semester of the academic year 2001, showed that most of them perceived that disappointment with grade has an impact on student attrition. 62.3% of the students believed that it has an impact on students’ attrition (Table 13). Similarly, 54% of the students believed that lack of continuous assessment and timely feedback has an impact on student attrition.

Table 13: Grading System and Its Impact on Student Attrition

| Impact Level | Frequency | Percent      |
|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| Very low     | 11        | 20.8         |
| Low          | 9         | 17.0         |
| Medium       | 10        | 18.9         |
| High         | 6         | 11.3         |
| Very high    | 17        | 32.1         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>53</b> | <b>100.0</b> |



Table 14: Lack of continuous assessment and timely feedback and impact on attrition

| <b>Impact Level</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|---------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Very low            | 15               | 30.0           |
| Low                 | 8                | 16.0           |
| Medium              | 11               | 22.0           |
| High                | 7                | 14.0           |
| Very high           | 9                | 18.0           |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>50</b>        | <b>100.0</b>   |

There are other issues that are raised in relation to assessment, even though it can not be taken as representative; two students - one from the regular and the other from the extension - division complained about submission of assignments. This is apparent when one of these students said: *‘I have submitted the assignment. When I saw that my grade is incomplete I asked the instructor but he said ‘you didn’t submit the assignment.’*

It is customary to have students sign for taking mid-term and final exams. But, tests and assignments are not signed for taking them. It is upon trust that activities are held. It could have a repercussion in violating the trust-based relationship between students and instructors. It may also give a room for some students for lame excuses for failure. A similar problem is raised from an extension student. Even if it could be a false allegation it can serve as a loophole. Thus, a mechanism of confirming whether assignments are received should be introduced: like signing during submission.

There are some courses that are said to contribute to student attrition: many students score D’s and F’s in them. The grading policy of SMUC clearly stipulates the percentage of A’s, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs, to be awarded in a course (Table 15).

Table 15: The Grading Policy at SMUC

| Grade    | Description                       | Grade Point | Range         |
|----------|-----------------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| <b>A</b> | <b>Superior grade (Excellent)</b> | <b>4</b>    | <b>0%-10%</b> |

|   |                                        |   |         |
|---|----------------------------------------|---|---------|
| B | Work above average (Good)              | 3 | 10%-15% |
| C | Average work(Fair)                     | 2 | 30%-65% |
| D | Work below average<br>(unsatisfactory) | 1 | 5%-10%  |
| F | Failing (below minimum<br>pass mark)   | 0 | 0%-5%   |

Source: Academic Resource Center, SMUC

The study, however, indicated the existence of some deviations from this policy. In some of the courses, the percentage of Ds has exceeded the limit, but it is because of shifting some from the percentage of Fs. But, in other courses, the reverse is observed. Thus, apart from the toughness of the assessments, failure to observe the grading policy properly could contribute to student attrition at SMUC.

### **Academic Advising and Counseling**

Students are supposed to get sufficient information as to what field of study they should pursue. Students learn best if it is based on interest, capability, and needs of the individual (Jensen, 2000 and Gardner, 1993). Thus, it is very important that s/he gets counseling in relation to in what field of study one could be productive. On the contrary students in the University College get information, guidance and counseling from individuals who have relationships with them (Table 16).

Table 16: Consultation in choice of field of study

| <b>Response Category</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> | <b>Cumulative Percent</b> |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Family                   | 29               | 47.5           | 47.5                      |
| Friends                  | 17               | 27.9           | 75.4                      |
| no body                  | 14               | 23.0           | 98.4                      |
| Relatives                | 1                | 1.6            | 100.0                     |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>61</b>        | <b>100.0</b>   |                           |

More than 75% of the students consulted members of their families or friends. And 23% decided by their own without consulting any body. None of them mentioned of any appropriate counseling in the decision of choice of field of study. Thus, getting appropriate counseling is a serious problem. Some department heads are of the opinion that some of the students join the department with a wrong perception. This is apparent when a department head says: *‘Students come to our department because they believe it is field of the time .... Many came without the orientation of the exact nature of the program and the challenges it has.’*

Students have a knowledge gap in the field of study to make a choice that best suits their interest and capability. Moreover, after students join the program they may feel that they don’t belong there and they have made the wrong decision. This entails the need for some mechanisms of enhancing belongingness. It seems that more efforts are required in the case of SMUC. This goes along with one Department Head’s statement: *‘There are no as such activities that are taking place to enhance students’ belongingness, but when students come to the department to transfer to other program we advise them and convince them to reconsider their ideas.’*

Generally, 62.6% of the students consider the inadequacy of guidance and counseling to have a significant effect on student attrition at SMUC (Table 17).

Table 17: Inadequacy of Guidance & Counseling and its Impact on Attrition

| <b>Effects of counseling on attrition</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> | <b>Cumulative Percent</b> |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Very low                                  | 11               | 21.2           | 21.2                      |
| Low                                       | 9                | 17.3           | 38.5                      |
| Medium                                    | 12               | 23.1           | 61.5                      |
| High                                      | 9                | 17.3           | 78.8                      |
| Very high                                 | 11               | 21.2           | 100.0                     |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>52</b>        | <b>100.0</b>   |                           |

Documentary evidence from the counseling office indicated that the number of students who visited the counselor’s office declined from 1999 (22) to 2000 (19) then

increased in 2001 (37). The reason for this, according to the counselor, is the approach used in the awareness creation program. Regarding this, the Officer says: “In 1999 we visited classes to introduce the service, while in 2000 we only used leaflets, we didn’t undertake face to face awareness creation programs.”

But, diverse problems are prevailing among students, which need counseling - exam anxiety is one. The following excerpt from an adult student in the extension program is appropriate here. He reported that: *‘I have problems with exam. I don’t feel at ease during exam. I study hard but not effective in exams. ... I feel that I have worked hard and I feel like I would score well, but I always score lesser. I have never got any advice except from the Department Head ...that I should study harder.’* Even though he needed the service he didn’t visit the counseling office. Therefore, it seems that there is lack of awareness on this issue.

A significant proportion of students (Table 18) believe that inadequate academic advising has an impact on student attrition.

Table 18: Impact of Inadequate Academic Advising on Student Attrition

| <b>Level</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> | <b>Cumulative Percent</b> |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Very low     | 12               | 23.1           | 23.1                      |
| Low          | 7                | 13.5           | 36.5                      |
| Medium       | 15               | 28.8           | 65.4                      |
| High         | 9                | 17.3           | 82.7                      |
| Very high    | 9                | 17.3           | 100.0                     |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>52</b>        | <b>100.0</b>   |                           |

In the academic year 2001, departments launched a scheme of assigning a group of students to advisors, but it was very rarely that students showed up at the department office for the service. An excerpt from a Department Head’s account is indicative of this fact: *‘We have now posted a notice that advisors are assigned for students, and instructors have introduced themselves to their respective advisees. But, students don’t*

*go to their advisors. Some of them tend to come to the department head when they face problem.'*

Students' lack of frequent contact with their advisors is a barrier in solving academic problems students are facing. On the other hand, from the interview with students, it is apparent that there is lack of awareness in services that students get from the institution in relation to academic matters. An excerpt from a student summarizes this fact as follows: *"It is me who should study hard. I don't expect anything other than taking lectures based on the specified schedule."*

Students seem to have lots of problems that they need to solve, but they may not know what advantages these advices might offer. They may not know what problems they need to discuss with their advisors. Many students also complain about advisory mistakes. It seems that there is also lack of appropriate academic advising. This excerpt from one Department Head highlights the above fact: *'If a student doesn't work on previous courses, then the following course will be very difficult. ... There are cases where students register for a course with out taking its prerequisite. For sure, in such cases the student scores an F.'*

It is important that the assigned advisors have good knowledge of what and how they advise their students. It is also likely that the assigned advisor may not know or may not act responsibly even when signing on students registration slip. An excerpt from an interview with a student in another department confirms this fact: *"I was supposed to register for a course in the summer. When I asked my adviser, she said 'Now you don't need to do any thing. You just come at the time of add and drop.' I visited every office to allow me to register. All confirmed that I can't."*

Moreover, students are disappointed with the advising they get during registration for courses. The following excerpt from one of the students clearly highlights this fact: *'Had I been told to take courses on time I would have taken those courses in which I*

*scored F and D at that time. I didn't because I thought there is no problem. I thought there is no difference if I take them on the next semester when I have lesser number of courses.'*

According to this student, she did not realize the repercussion that the score in the previous semester has on her status during the current semester, although she has got a passing grade. Now this is a problem for low achievers who usually tend to be dependent on others for decision making, and it is at such point that veteran advisors could make a difference. 2.6% of the students, who withdrew in the year 2000, were because of unavailability of courses in the summer semester.

### **Retention & Support System**

Student retention mechanisms are high on the agenda of many higher learning institutions of the developed world. Cognizant of this designing support system and counseling service are becoming among the main strategies to mitigate attrition.

Table 20: Impact of Tutorial & Support System on Student Attrition

| <b>Level</b> | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> | <b>Cumulative Percent</b> |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Very low     | 14               | 27.5           | 27.5                      |
| Low          | 11               | 21.6           | 49.0                      |
| Medium       | 6                | 11.8           | 60.8                      |
| High         | 10               | 19.6           | 80.4                      |
| Very high    | 10               | 19.6           | 100.0                     |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>51</b>        | <b>100.0</b>   |                           |

According to the respondents, the importance of tutorial and support system on student attrition is significant. This is exhibited by the large proportion, (51.0%), of the respondents who valued the importance of Tutorial and Support System within a range of 'medium' to 'very high' (Table 20).

The interviews held with the students also indicate that lack of study time rather than unavailability of support system was a responsible factor for their failure. The following excerpt from an extension student's account attests this fact: *'It is my*

*responsibility to study hard. The University College has done its level best - classes are offered regularly. But I don't have enough time to study as required.'*

As an extension student who had no spare time to spend on tutorial, it could be understandable why she did not claim tutorial and other support systems are a necessity for the success of students. Her statement indicates that she believes that she could be successful under normal circumstances: if work strains are alleviated or pertinent support systems are designed that suit her situations. The students need a retention scheme that takes the situation of these students into account.

The student interviewees also indicated that they were not engaged in their studies during the first months of the semester. The following excerpt from the report of a regular student underlies this fact: *"I don't study hard. I only study when exam time approaches. It is all my fault"* This implied that he is less motivated and less self-regulated and thus, needs some tasks that push him for some engagement right from the beginning of the semester. There also need to be a form of support system to engage him throughout the semester, as he is reluctant to study. Such cases are significant when viewed in the light of the motivational and self regulatory issues associated with low achievers. It would be very difficult for them to manage huge tasks in a very short period of time after staying with out work for weeks.

The need for working on how we can get the interest of students to attend tutorial classes and other support systems is a concern for many instructors. This is apparent when the Department Head said: "We arrange tutorial classes, but students are reluctant to attend". Why do students refrain from using support systems? Another Department Head also said: "The time assigned for tutorial is not convenient for students as well as for the instructors. They don't like to come on Sundays."

Establishing support systems based on the needs of individual students is quite important. The instructor as well as the students can participate at their convenience

and the instructor could be accountable for the effectiveness of the specific support system s/he has rendered.

Peer teaching is seen as one major retention mechanism and some students feel that they gain advantage in working in groups. The following excerpt from an extension student asserts this fact: *'I had a [study] group of five [while I was] in the diploma program. I didn't have such a group in the degree program. ... I actually didn't persist in learning because of work. I have been away two times – once for a semester and next for a semester and summer – then I missed the chance; I couldn't maintain a study group.'*

The frequent withdrawal he made while he was in the degree program could not enable him to maintain a study group. His words indicate that both the frequent withdrawal and the inability to maintain a group could have effect on the student's performance. He implied that he was benefiting from the group work he had been enjoying while he was a diploma student. For students like him tutorial of the type we are handling in class may not help because of the nature of their work. Thus, we need to devise other mechanisms or adopt some practices other institutions use such as peer teaching and establishing learning communities. It is also possible to let him design a plan and ask for help in its execution.

Documentary sources kept at the registrar's office of SMUC indicate that the main reasons for withdrawal are academic and personal ones followed by health/maternity: 36.9, 32.4, and 13.3, respectively (Table 21).

As reported in an earlier section, the majority of students who withdrew in the period referred herein are characterized by poor academic background and performance. Thus, academic reason can be taken as the main reason for student attrition. But, the interdependence of factors should be considered; other studies indicate that low income has effect on academic achievement, for example.



Table 21: Reasons for Withdrawal

| Reason               | Frequency  |            |            | Percent      |              |              |
|----------------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                      | 2000       | 1999       | 1998       | 2000         | 1999         | 1998         |
| Academic             | 155        | 162        | 118        | 36.9         | 34.1         | 33.7         |
| Personal             | 134        | 166        | 130        | 32.4         | 34.9         | 37.1         |
| Health and Maternity | 56         | 48         | 40         | 13.3         | 10.1         | 11.4         |
| Inconvenience        | 41         | 62         | 39         | 9.8          | 13.1         | 11.1         |
| Course               | 11         | 8          | 1          | 2.6          | 1.7          | .3           |
| Financial            | 10         | 17         | 15         | 2.4          | 3.6          | 4.3          |
| Transfer             | 7          | 7          | 7          | 1.6          | 1.5          | 2.0          |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>420</b> | <b>475</b> | <b>350</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Source: Registrar's Office, SMUC

Some instructors believe that the increase in the attrition rate at SMUC is because of financial reason. This is apparent when a department head says: "When I ask them, some of the students say that they no longer afford paying for the courses they register". The proportion of students who mentioned finance as reason for withdrawal is very small 3.4% (see the table above). The information obtained from Student Affairs Office also indicated the same thing.

Thus, the retention and support system that the institution would require seems to incline to the students who fail to succeed academically. But, the interdependence of causes should not be ignored.

Maintaining quality, immediacy of feedback, understanding the need and capability of students and working in that line to retain them in the right track are issues that need serious consideration. Thus, instructors need to plan as to how courses should be offered and need to evaluate their effectiveness in the context of many low achievers who are less motivated and less self-regulated.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

The data indicated that there are problems in various aspects of the learning process which can have potential contribution to student attrition. Some of them seem just mere incidences, but as a problem they should be alleviated.

Student attrition can not be taken as a linear activity. There is interdependence among factors that work in favor of students dropping out. It has to be examined in a holistic approach. What works for dropping out of student 'A' may not work for student 'B'. In other words, by paying attention to individual differences, it is possible to tackle every problem in the teaching-learning process that contributes to student attrition.

The course outline which doesn't speak what the significance of the course is likely to miss its objectives. For a mind which needs justification to move an inch, a course rationale is significant. Absence of a strict plan and program with strict execution and immediate feedback may be devastating, and may result in academic disengagement.

Some of the factors that contributed to the students' attrition that was observed in the period referred herein were:

- Poor academic achievement: The major reason for withdrawal is academic reasons.
- Poor academic engagement: the students are relatively free for the first two months and become busy during the mid-term exams, and in the period between the mid-term exam and the final exam. The implication is tougher for low achievers who are naturally less motivated and self-regulated.
- Inadequacy of academic advising, reluctance of using the service and lack knowledge of what issues could be discussed through this service.
- Reluctance in using counseling services

- Unavailability of courses during the summer also made some students to withdraw during the summer semester.
- Low motivation to study and take tasks seriously.
- Maternity and health cases
- Poor financial status
- Inconveniences related to work (for employed students)

### **Recommendations**

Various universities have established successful retention mechanisms: learning community; peer-assisted learning/peer tutoring; guidance and counseling for at-risk students from the beginning of the program; etc. SMUC is expected to consider such mechanisms by identifying good practices observed elsewhere and the associated problems.

It seems that there is lack of concern among students in their own learning. Some students don't feel that they are responsible for their learning. Thus, there should be a concerted effort to cultivate appropriate concern and continuous effort in learning. In this regard, establishing learning communities can enhance student belongingness as well as reducing student attrition.

There are some common characteristics of low achievers. It is very important that instructors and others who are in a position to work with these students need to understand them so that they can assist them effectively. Accordingly, short-term training is important for faculty on counseling and advising, especially in relation to the needs of low achievers.

Cases of common irregularities that can occur in add and drop of courses should be identified by the Registrar Office and on-job training has to be arranged for faculty

members so as to deliver appropriate advising. Early and repeated notifications of add and drop, and availability of courses needs to be made proactively.

Assigning a group of students to an instructor is a common trend in other universities across the world, and is found to be helpful in retaining and persistence students. It is also important to arrange orientation session to advisees by advisors at the beginning; time and place for advice; and benefits for the service. Follow up is required on the progresses of individual students. It is also important to raise awareness of students about the importance of counseling (possible issues for counseling, advantage, time and place).

It is important to diversify the assessment methods which could be held right from the beginning of the teaching-learning process, so that low achievers could be actively engaged through out the semester. This will not overburden them at the end of the semester. Moreover, it is advisable to prepare a guide line on the issues of tutorial and other required support systems, and how are they going to be handled or held.

As a means of enhancing instructor's commitment, it is recommendable to emplace a variety of evaluation mechanisms like formative evaluation; preparing teaching portfolio and evaluation for appropriate advising by advisees. It is advisable to discuss on the performance evaluation with the individual instructors: describe and clarify on issues on the portfolio and as to whether s/he accepts result of the performance evaluation. Good amount of time needs to be allotted to investigate teaching effectiveness.

The reduction of student attrition rate, however, should not be at the expense of the quality of the education. The instructor needs to give progress report on how the course is getting and what remedial activities are recommended. As a result, the course can better be learnt without compromising quality. There needs to be consensus, and every stakeholder needs to be convinced of the activities that are to be undertaken in

the reduction of attrition. Thus, the emphasis needs to be on the retention mechanisms. In this connection, portfolio of activities; problems faced, and solutions provided can facilitate the betterment of the teaching- learning process of courses.

Departments and faculties also need to document rate of student attrition in their respective programs and it is also important that the instructors submit the proportion of unsatisfactory grades achieved in a given course.

Financial assistance (scholarship) for students who are not capable of paying the tuition fee, but exhibiting promising performance also needs to be considered.

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