



Institutional Research Reports

University of Kentucky

The Retention of First-Year Students

September 2004

Most postsecondary institutions closely monitor the proportion of first-year students who return for a second year of college. The one-year retention rate is widely regarded as an important indicator of institutional effectiveness. A low retention rate may be symptomatic of an institution that has trouble meeting its students' needs and aspirations. Moreover, the attrition of significant numbers of students hampers an institution's ability to apportion resources efficiently and raises questions about accountability in the minds of parents and legislators.¹

The Office of Institutional Research recently conducted a study of why first-year students leave UK. First, we worked with the Registrar's Office and the National Student Clearinghouse to determine where our first-year students go after leaving the University of Kentucky. Second, we collaborated with the Survey Research Center (SRC) on a telephone survey of non-returning students to learn why they left UK, how they evaluated their academic and social experiences during their first year, and what their plans were for pursuing an advanced education.

What Is the Status of Students after Their First Year?

This study focused initially on 3,718 first-time, first-year students who began their collegiate studies at UK in fall 2002. The retention rate for this cohort of full- and part-time students was 76.7 percent.² A total of 865 full- and part-time students (23.3%) did not return to the University in fall 2003. The National Student Clearinghouse was able to find records in its database documenting that 619 of these 865 students had transferred to other postsecondary institutions. It is pos-

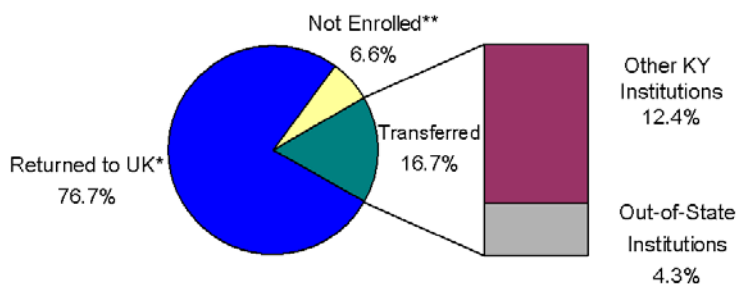
sible that a few students were not identified as transfers because they subsequently enrolled in institutions that do not participate in the Clearinghouse database. However, over 90 percent of the nation's postsecondary institutions submit data to the Clearinghouse database. Thus, the available evidence suggests that 239 students from this cohort did not transfer to another college or university after leaving UK.

Highlights from this phase of the study and a graph depicting the enrollment status of the entire 2002 cohort are presented below:

- Over three-quarters (76.7%) of the fall 2002 cohort returned the following fall to continue their studies at UK.
- Of the 865 students who did not return to UK in fall 2003, most (619) subsequently enrolled at another college or university.
- Nearly three times as many transfers chose to continue their education at another Kentucky college or university rather than an out-of-state institution.
- The top five Kentucky institutions where UK first-year students subsequently enrolled were: Lexington Community College (131), the University of Louisville (63), Northern Kentucky University (38), Jefferson Community College (32),

Figure 1

The Fall 2002 Cohort of First-Year Students: Collegiate Status in 2003-04



Note1: *This retention rate includes full- and part-time students. The standard retention rate for full-time students is 77.1%.

Note2: **Includes seven students whose records were not found.

Source: UK Office of Institutional Research and National Student Clearinghouse

¹ University of Massachusetts Amherst (2001) Non-returning first-year students: Why they leave and where they go. *Assessment Bulletin*. 4:1-4.

² UK's official retention rate is based on the percentage of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who return the following fall for a second year of college. The retention rate for full-time students from the fall 2002 cohort was 77.1%. Since part-time students were included in the first phase of this study, we report the retention rate for both full- and part-time students in the chart and narrative above.

and Western Kentucky University (29). These five institutions accounted for almost half (47.3%) of all initial transfers from UK.

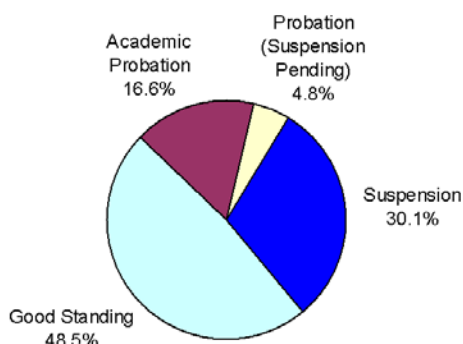
- Slightly more than half (52.3%) of all transfers were enrolled at two-year institutions.
- Nearly nine of ten transfers (88.8%) were enrolled full-time at their most recent college.
- One of 10 transfers (10.5%) had enrolled in two or more institutions since leaving UK.

Why Do Students Leave UK?

The Office of Institutional Research has been closely tracking retention rates of first-year students in recent years. In our efforts to develop a statistical model that forecasts retention, the overall first-year grade point average turns out to be the best predictor of whether a student returns to UK for a second year. Figure 2 illustrates the academic status of 850 full-time students who did not return to UK in fall 2003. The chart reveals that one-half (48.5%) of the full-time students who left UK prior to their sophomore year were in good academic standing at the time of their departure. One of five (21.49%) students was on probation for maintaining an unsatisfactory grade point average. And nearly one-third (30.1%) of the students in this group had been suspended from the University.

Figure 2

Academic Status of First-Year Students Who Left UK During or After Their First Year



Source: Office of the Registrar and Office of Institutional Research

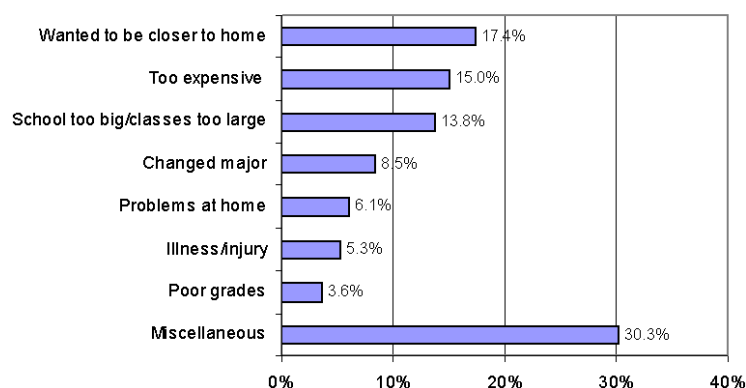
In this year's study, we sought to learn more about why students who had the option of staying at UK ultimately decided to pursue other opportunities. Consequently, the second phase of our retention study targeted nearly 600 former, full-time students who were either in good standing academically or on probation when they left UK. Students who had been suspended for poor grades were not asked to partici-

pate in the telephone survey. The UK Office of Institutional Research targeted 583 students for participation in the telephone survey. The Survey Research Center staff eventually contacted 293 of these students. A total of 250 students consented to be interviewed, which constitutes a response rate of 85.3 percent.³

The first question on the telephone survey asked non-returning students to report the most important reason why they decided to leave UK. The most common responses to this question are listed in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Most Important Reasons for Leaving UK



The desire to be closer to home was the most frequently given reason for leaving UK. Nearly one in five students mentioned being homesick or wanting to live near home, family, and friends. The next most common reason for leaving was the belief that UK was too expensive. And the third most frequently given reason for not returning was the perception that the "school was too big" or that "classes were too large." Survey participants were asked if there were additional reasons that affected their decision to leave UK. When respondents gave another reason, however, most generally mentioned one of the common reasons listed above.

How Do Students Rate the Quality of Their UK Experiences?

We asked non-returning students to evaluate the quality of instruction and advising at UK. With a couple of exceptions, students' ratings were fairly positive:

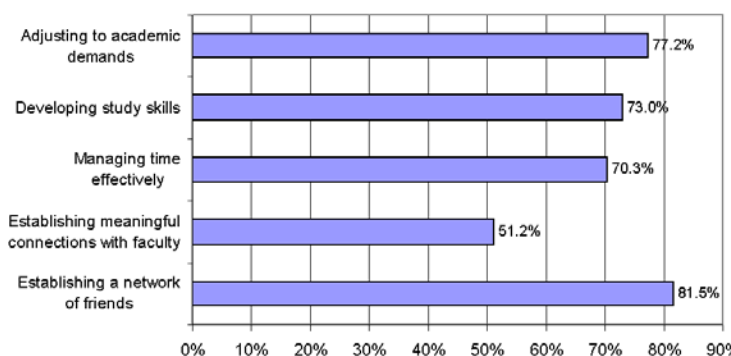
³ Interviews were conducted from April 5 to May 15, 2004. For each student in the sample, up to 20 phone calls were made, and as many as 10 scheduled 'call-backs' were attempted for those contacted at inconvenient times.

- Seven of 10 (71.9%) rated the overall quality of instruction as good or excellent.
- Two of five (42.1%) rated the individual attention from instructors as good or excellent.
- Nearly three-quarters (72.9%) rated the willingness of faculty to meet with students as good or excellent.
- Three-quarters (75.0%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "my academic advisor spent sufficient time with me."
- Roughly four of five (82.8) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "my academic advisor was accessible when I needed help."
- Nearly seven of eight (86.1%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "my academic advisor reviewed my academic record prior to giving advice."

We also asked non-returning students to rate how successful they had been on several academic and social dimensions while attending UK. The results for this line of questions are depicted in the chart below.

Figure 4

Perceived Success in Accomplishing Selected Skills and Activities
(Percent Reporting 'Successful' or 'Very Successful')



Relative to other items on the survey, students rate *establishing a network of friends* as their most successful endeavor. A large body of institutional research, including our own research program, has found that the social dimension of college life is critical to students' satisfaction and has an impact on retention. Students report the least success in *establishing meaningful connections with faculty*. This finding is not surprising, given the size of many freshman classes and the lack of confidence that some first-year students have in their communication skills. Students' difficulty in establishing meaningful relationships with faculty should not be construed as a shortcoming on the part of UK professors. It is

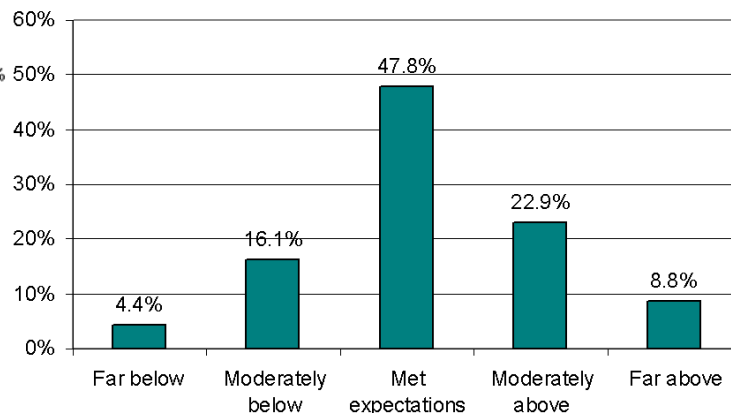
worth noting that on the National Survey of Student Engagement, our first-year students and seniors reported in 2001 and 2003 somewhat greater involvement with faculty than their counterparts at other large research universities. First-year students and seniors scored between the 60th and 70th percentiles on the benchmark measuring student interaction with faculty members.

Roughly three-quarters of the survey respondents report success in *adjusting to the academic demands* of college, including *developing study skills*. About seven in 10 students believe they were successful in *managing time effectively*. These results are comparable to those reported by returning students on the Survey of First-Year Experiences, which is administered near the end of the spring semester. But it should be noted that only half of non-returning students left UK in good standing. If we had interviewed students suspended for academic reasons, it is likely that students' ratings of their accomplishments would be somewhat lower.

An important question is how satisfied are non-returning students with their overall educational experiences at UK. Does lack of satisfaction seem to be driving a large proportion of students away? We asked students in our sample "to what extent did your experience at UK meet your expectations?" The answers students gave to this question are shown below.

Figure 5

"To What Extent Did UK Meet Your Expectations?"

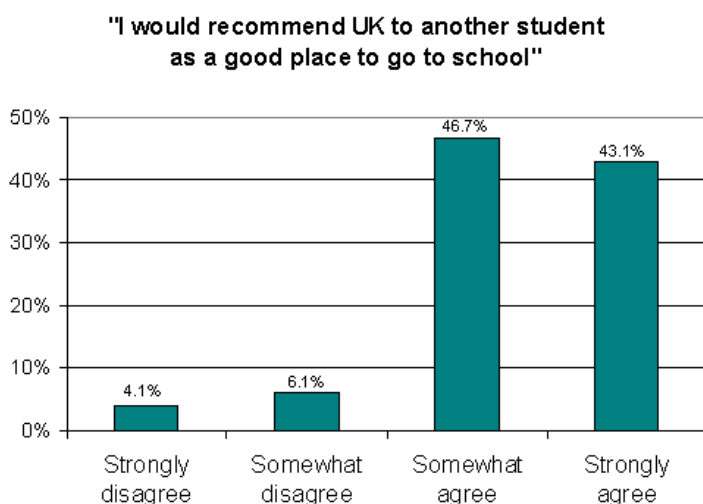


Nearly one-third (31.7%) of the respondents indicated that their experiences at UK were either moderately above or far above their expectations. About half (47.8%) reported that UK had met their expectations. Roughly one in five

(20.5%) students rated their experiences here as either moderately below or far below their expectations.

We also asked students whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "I would recommend UK to another student as a good place to go to college." Their responses to this question are illustrated in the chart below.

Figure 6



Nine of ten (89.8%) students either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Students' responses to this question and the previous item suggest that dissatisfaction with UK is not a major force in driving most students away from the University. Interestingly, one-third (33.2%) of those surveyed said they planned to return to UK at some point in their college careers. Once again, however, it is important to consider that ratings on these two 'satisfaction' items would undoubtedly be lower if the telephone survey had targeted students suspended for academic reasons.

What are Students' Reasons for Transferring?

The SRC telephone survey, as well as the search of the National Clearinghouse Database, reveals that most non-returning first-year students are pursuing their educations at another postsecondary institution. Four of five survey respondents (83.1%) indicated that they were currently enrolled at another college. Most of these students (70.4%) were employed while pursuing their studies elsewhere. As one would expect, students' most important reasons for transferring to their present college were highly consistent with their reasons for leaving UK.

Relative to UK, students reported that their new institution was:

- Closer to home (42.0%)
- Less expensive (9.8%)
- Smaller in size (7.3%)

In addition, one in ten students (9.8%) reported that their new college offered a major or program that was not offered at UK.

The telephone interview concluded by asking respondents, "If UK could have done one thing to prevent you from leaving, what would it have been?" Again, the reasons offered by students touched upon a related set of themes:

- Lower the cost of attending (22.0%)
- Offer smaller classes with more individual attention from instructors (17.7%)
- Offer the major program I want to pursue (14.9%)
- Miscellaneous suggestions (45.4%)

Further Thoughts on Retention

UK's official retention rate for full-time students from the fall 2002 cohort declined to 77.1 percent, down from 79.3 percent for the previous first-year class. The drop in retention rates occurred as the University enrolled its largest first-year class in history. UK has been engaged in efforts during the past few years to meet ambitious enrollment goals established by the Council on Postsecondary Education. Faculty and administrators face a major challenge in raising retention rates while admitting increasingly larger classes of first-year students.

This study has shown that no single factor explains why first-year students leave UK. We have seen that 30 percent of first-year students who failed to return the following year were suspended from the University, primarily for academic reasons. Of the remaining first-year students who left UK, the most common reasons for leaving could be traced to their preferences to be closer to home, to attend smaller classes, and to pay less for their education.

This analysis suggests that our capacity to increase retention rates by addressing non-returning students' needs may be more limited than many of us would care to admit. Certainly, the easiest way to boost retention rates would be to adopt more selective criteria for admitting freshmen. Students from the fall 2002 cohort who earned ACT Composite scores of

'28 and above' have a retention rate of 87.9 percent, about 10 percentage points higher than the average for the entire cohort. But UK's strategic initiative to enroll more students may preclude the option of limiting admission to students with the very best academic credentials.

Given Kentucky's uncertain economic picture, the University will have a difficult time hiring the additional professors needed to pare down the ratio of students-to-faculty in many classes. Consequently, UK may not be able to satisfy some non-returning students' needs for smaller classes. A history of decreasing state support will continue to exert pressure on this institution to consider substantial tuition increases in upcoming years. Comparative data on tuition and fees supports the position that an advanced education at UK is still a bargain. However, our telephone survey findings suggest the cost of attending UK is forcing some students to find more affordable institutions where they can continue their education.

There will always be some students who are homesick for family and friends. Our telephone survey revealed that one of five non-returning students went home every weekend while they were here. And nearly one-third reported visiting home two-to-three weekends each month. The current administration has tried to engage students in the social fabric of university life by offering programs and services that encourage students to stay in Lexington on the weekends. This is a worthwhile practice, and innovative activities that keep students on campus should continue to be devised. It is interesting to speculate whether we might have retained some of the non-returning students if activities had been provided that met their particular social needs.

Our study has shown that non-returning students assign relatively high marks to the academic advising they receive. One issue that should probably be addressed in some advising sessions is the potential risk involved in being employed off-campus. Our previous research has shown that the number of hours students work off-campus is negatively correlated with cumulative, first-year, grade point averages. The amount of time students work on-campus is unrelated to their freshman academic performance. On this spring's telephone survey, over one-fourth (26.2%) of the non-returning students reported working more than 15 hours per week while at UK, over twice the rate (11.7%) reported by returning students on a survey administered in Spring 2003.

Students who spend a fair amount of time traveling back and forth between their job and campus may have less time to go to the library, meet with professors during office hours, or develop social ties that bind them to the university community. Undoubtedly, some students employed off-campus have financial needs that necessitate working fairly long hours at wages that may be significantly higher than income produced through on-campus employment. But our past research has found only a small, positive correlation between the number of hours students are employed off-campus and their level of concern about paying for their education. Many first-year students are accustomed to the spending power they had when they worked during their high school years. The lure of fashionable clothes, compact discs, a cell phone, and a car creates a powerful incentive to work long hours at a 'regular' job. Clearly, advisors should talk to students about the risks off-campus employment poses to academic success.

Finally, this study has found that seven of 10 students who left UK after their first year transferred to another institution. This finding is consistent with an emerging body of research documenting multi-institutional attendance patterns of postsecondary students. A major national study on attendance patterns and bachelor's degree attainment discovered that the proportion of undergraduates who transferred at least once increased from 40 percent to 54 percent during the 70s and 80s.⁴ This research project also found that students who began their college careers in selective four-year institutions and those initially attending open-access colleges attended multiple institutions at the highest rates. After reviewing the literature on student migration patterns, Victor Borden recently noted: "The traditional 'linear-matriculation' image of the college student still influences policy formulation and educational practice at all levels, despite the reality that the majority of 18-to 24-year-olds do not experience a college education in a linear fashion."⁵

⁴ Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the Toolbox: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

⁵ Borden, V.M.H. (2004). "Accommodating Student Swirl." *Change*. 36:10-17.

Where Do We Go from Here?

We have already discussed how dwindling state appropriations and the University's strategic initiative to enroll more students may limit the types of interventions that can be used to raise retention rates. Given these constraints, the most promising interventions appear to be the following:

- Convey more realistic expectations about the demands of college-level work to prospective students and their parents
- Analyze the effectiveness of admissions criteria used to admit new students
- Develop new living learning communities and improve existing ones in an effort to engage students in the social and academic life of the University
- Develop an early warning system that identifies academically at-risk students for intensive advising and other interventions

Communicating Expectations about Academic Work in College

UK should engage in greater outreach efforts with high school students and parents to convey more realistic expectations about the demands of college-level work. First-year students from the fall 2002 cohort evaluated the academic challenge of their schooling in fairly predictable ways over the course of their first year. Figure 7 displays how students assessed the scholastic challenge of their senior year on a fall 2002 survey and the academic demands of their freshman year on a spring 2003 questionnaire. Nearly two-thirds (63.8%) indicated that their senior year was either "not at all challenging" or "somewhat challenging." However, three-quarters (74.1%) of the

freshman class reported their first year at UK was either "challenging" or "very challenging."

Educators and policy makers should be concerned about the dramatic shift--over the course of one year--in students' perceptions of academic challenge. These survey findings clearly support many educators' claims that the senior year of high school generally lacks academic rigor. The demands of college-level study come as a rude awakening to many first-year students. The higher education community and parents of high school students need to be more forceful in demanding that the senior year be more productive. In our ongoing freshman research program, the level of academic challenge students reported during their senior year is a significant predictor of their cumulative, first-year GPA: the greater the level of challenge experienced during the senior year, the greater the likelihood that a student will earn above-average grades during the freshman year.

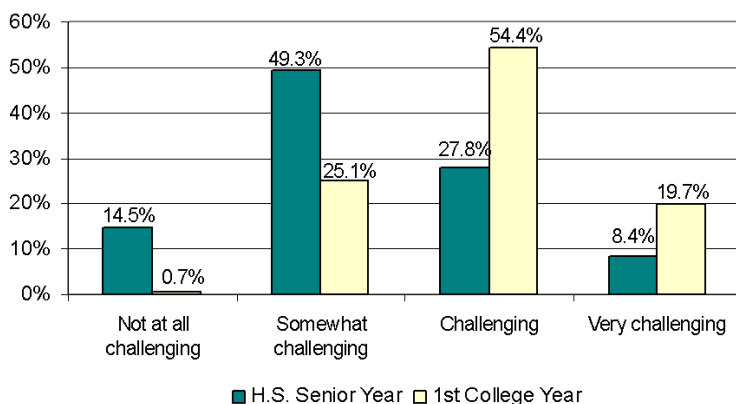
Achieving good grades in high school while expending little effort may lead many students to believe they can be academically successful in college with simply a few extra hours of study. The average high school GPA earned by the fall 2002 freshman cohort was 3.5. Yet two of five (39.3%) first-year students reported that they had studied only two or fewer hours in a typical week during their senior year. And seven of 10 (70.3%) reported studying five or fewer hours per week. At the end of their first year at UK, students estimated studying a little more than they did during their senior year. However, the amount of time devoted to preparing for class and completing assigned work was still substantially below what most faculty members expect. Two of five (41.2%) students indicated they spent five or fewer hours on homework in a typical week! Three-quarters (73.2%) reported studying 10 or fewer hours in a typical week. And, on the 'high end,' a little over one-fourth (28.2%) of the first-year class reported studying more than 10 hours per week.

Findings from national surveys also reveal that many high school seniors have unrealistic expectations about college life.⁶ Other researchers have noted the importance of

⁶ Sax, L.J., Gilmartin, S.K., Keup, J.R., Bryant, A.N., and Plecha, M. (2002). *Findings from the 2001 pilot administration of Your First College Year (YFCY): National norms*. Los Angeles, CA. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California at Los Angeles.

Figure 7

Perceived Academic Challenge of High School and College



anticipatory socialization in helping students adjust to new roles and respond to unfamiliar norms and expectations.⁷ Students who have a better grasp of what college is like are more apt to be satisfied with their collegiate experiences than other students and are more likely to graduate with a four-year degree.⁸

The curriculum of UK 101, our freshman orientation seminar, is designed to ease students' transition to postsecondary education by furnishing them with more realistic expectations about college life. UK 101 instructors could enhance their discussions of academic expectations by presenting survey findings culled from the First-year Survey Program. Last year, the UK Office of Institutional Research presented first-year survey results to an inner city high school in Louisville. Perhaps presentations should be developed that relay basic academic expectations to students and their parents at the Summer Advising Conferences.

Analyzing the Effectiveness of Admission Criteria

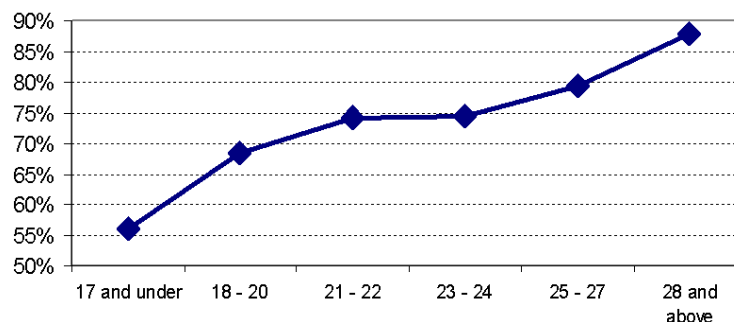
Students applying for admission to UK are required to submit transcripts of high school grades, along with ACT or SAT test scores. UK's selective admission process enables students to compensate for poor standardized test scores by earning good grades in high school. Likewise, students who have achieved a relatively low grade point average can still gain admission by presenting reasonably high ACT or SAT scores.

Many colleges use high school grades and standardized test scores as admission criteria because they are positively correlated with students' cumulative, first-year GPA. However, the two account for less variance in students' freshman grades than one might expect: roughly 11 to 19 percent of the variance individually, and about 23 percent

of the variance when used together to predict first-year grades.⁹

Figure 8 shows the relationship between different ranges of ACT Scores and first-year retention rates for the entering class of 2002. Students with ACT Composite scores below 18 had a slightly better than 50/50 chance of returning to UK for a second year of college. With a Composite score in the 18-20 range, students' retention rates improved to 68 percent. Retention rates jumped six percentage points when students earned test scores in the 21-22 range. But rates leveled off at the 23-24 range before rising again with scores in the 25-27 and 28 and above ranges.

Figure 8
Retention Rate by ACT Range
Fall 2002 Cohort



It is not clear why retention rates leveled off in the 23-24 score range. The same leveling-off effect has been observed for several years when six-year graduation rates are plotted against ACT Composite score ranges. Two plausible explanations for this phenomenon may be at work. First, the particular combination of ACT composite scores and high school grades that gain a student admittance to the University may not be appropriately calibrated. It is possible that a student who has earned an ACT score in the 23-24 range may be admitted to UK with a high school GPA that is simply too low. The relatively low GPA that a student can present with an ACT score of 23 or 24 may indicate that the student is not

⁷ Hossler, D, Kuh, G. D., and Olsen, D. (2001). Finding (more) fruit on the vines: Using higher education research and institutional research to guide institutional policies and strategies (Part II). *Research in Higher Education* 42: 223-235.

⁸ See the following references: Astin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college?: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.; Pascarella, E.T., and Terenzini, P.T. (1991). *How college affects students: findings and insights from twenty years of research*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.; Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

⁹ Nichols, P. (2001) *Validity of ACT composite scores and high school grades for predicting first-year academic success at the University of Kentucky*. Unpublished manuscript. ACT, Inc. Iowa City, Iowa. This study found that UK students' first-year GPA was correlated +. 33 with the ACT Composite, +. 43 with high school GPA, and +. 48 with the ACT Composite and high school grades, jointly.

motivated enough to perform college-level work on a consistent basis. Second, the leveling-off effect may have less to do with admission criteria than it does with an ineffective placement process for key courses. Students who lack well-developed reading and quantitative skills may be placed into courses that require a level of proficiency they are not capable of reaching without first mastering more basic skills. The Office of Institutional Research is now collaborating with statisticians at the SAS Institute to examine the effectiveness of current admission criteria.

Developing and Improving Learning Communities

One of every eight first-year students who left UK during or immediately after their first year said the University was 'too large' or classes were 'too big.' For large research universities, learning communities hold the promise of creating small, cohesive groups of students who are connected to one another in educationally purposeful ways. UK's residential learning communities also attempt to create clusters of warm, closely-knit environments to facilitate learning and enhance personal development in and outside of the classroom environment.

Students and faculty within a learning community have similar academic goals and collaborate with one another in the exploration of their shared interests and scholarly pursuits. Yet a review of the literature reveals that learning communities often assume a number of very different curricular and residential arrangements:¹⁰

- *Curricular learning communities* enroll groups of students in several courses linked together around a common academic discipline or topic;
- *Classroom learning communities* create several communities of students within the classroom and emphasize the importance of collaborative learning and group projects;
- *Residential learning communities* involve groups of students who live and take classes together in close proximity and who interact frequently outside of class in pursuing similar interests; and
- *Student-type learning communities* are created for selected groups of students (e.g., the academically under-

prepared, disabled, intellectually gifted, under-represented, or students who share similar interests).

Recent research shows that participation in learning communities is positively correlated with academic engagement, self-reported gains in skills and knowledge, and overall satisfaction with college.¹¹

Several living and learning communities have been formed at UK in recent years to address a wide range of interests: community service, wellness, spirituality, cross-cultural understanding, and the fine arts. In addition, UK offers discipline-based, residential learning communities for students studying engineering, science, and German. Last year, Student Affairs staff collaborated with the Office of Institutional Research on an assessment of student preferences for different types of theme-based learning communities. Survey results were used to develop several new learning communities aimed at satisfying students' expressed interests and needs. Research can play a significant role in identifying which types of learning communities are most effective in promoting student retention and producing desirable learning outcomes.

Developing an Early Warning System for At-Risk Students

Finally, we recommend focusing efforts on the development of an "early-warning identification system" to detect academically at-risk students. A key to increasing retention rates is to identify students who may eventually become disengaged--both academically and socially--from the campus community. By quickly spotting students who display certain warning signs, we may be in a position to deliver effective advising and other services that may help turn around someone's academic career.

The Office of Institutional Research is working with statisticians at the SAS Institute to develop mathematical models that will constitute a major component of the early warning system. The project is using data from students' application files, the Student Information System, and the fall Survey of First-Year Students to enhance our ability to predict which students will experience the most difficulty in adjusting to university life. We are currently assessing the

¹⁰ Lenning, O.T., and Ebbers, L.H. (1999). The powerful potential of learning communities: Improving education for the future. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report. vol. 26, no. 6.

¹¹ Zhao, C., and Kuh, G.D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*. 45:115-138.

diagnostic value of various indicators: the high school GPA, ACT/SAT scores, measures of academic and social disengagement, procrastination tendencies, student role identification, and perceived academic challenge of the senior year. After significant indicators have been identified, we face the challenge of packaging this information so faculty and staff who work daily with at-risk students on our campus can readily use it.

Conclusions

About half of all students who leave UK prior to earning a bachelor's degree do so either during or immediately after their first year. Adjusting to the pressures of college life is difficult, particularly for new students who have never been away from home for significant periods of time. During their initial months at college, first-year students must negotiate a maze of new expectations for conducting their academic and social lives while learning to manage significant increases in personal autonomy. A successful first-year experience provides the framework for achieving a variety of educational and personal goals. First-year students are cultivating important academic skills, forging a personal identity and philosophy of life, making plans for a career, and forming and maintaining new social relationships.¹²

Results from this research project support a key finding in the literature on student retention: no single reason explains why the majority of students leave college during or just after their freshman year. Many factors affect the likelihood of first-year students returning for a second year of college. Some students--despite satisfactory high school grades--are not academically prepared for the rigors of an undergraduate education. Thirty percent of first-year students who failed to return the following fall to UK were suspended, mostly for academic reasons. In our telephone survey, non-returning students often mentioned their desire to be closer to home, to attend a smaller institution, or pay less for their education. Interestingly, nearly one-third of the respondents to our telephone survey gave miscellaneous reasons for leaving UK that were not widely shared by other non-returning students.

The University must raise its retention rate if it wishes to join the ranks of elite public research universities. UK is

¹² Upcraft, M.L., Gardner, J.N., and Associates (1989). *The freshman year experience*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

currently tied for last among its 19 benchmark institutions in retaining its first-year students. The University's retention rate of 77 percent for the 2002 cohort is 15 percentage-points below the median of its benchmarks. The multi-dimensional nature of retention suggests that UK should develop a broad array of initiatives targeted at different student groups as it attempts to perform better on this indicator. In our efforts to prevent students from leaving, it is important to remember that we already know a lot about why some students stay in school and others leave. We know that students benefit by working closely with their professors, receiving sensible counsel from their advisors, and by participating in activities that fully engage them in the life of the University.

Developing effective policies to support the needs of first-year students hinges upon our ability to gauge accurately how students spend their time and what they hope to acquire from their studies. The need to understand what students do with their time is one of the driving forces behind the development of UK's First-Year Survey program and its biennial participation in the National Survey of Student Engagement. Dr. George D. Kuh, Director of the NSSE, forcefully expresses this point of view:

"What students do in college and how they use an institution's resources for learning are critical to their success broadly defined . . . Students do better academically and socially when they apportion reasonable chunks of time to a combination of the right kinds of activities, such educationally purposeful things as studying, interacting with faculty members, advisors, and right-minded peers, performing community service, and participating in co-curricular activities. For colleges and universities to induce such desirable behavior by more of their students on a more frequent basis they need to first determine how students are spending their time during the critical first year of college and to what extent students' expectations for the first year are consistent with the institution's and students' own aspirations."¹³

¹³ Kuh, G.D. (2000). Tools for assessing the first-year student experience. *First-Year Assessment Listserv*. <http://www.Brevard.edu/fyc/listerv/remarks/kuh.htm>.

In promoting the success of our newest students, faculty and administrators must help students find a close match between their social and academic needs and the opportunities accessible on campus. Assessment will play a major role in identifying promising new programs and refining existing services to meet students' needs and expectations.



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