

Understanding Student Dropout: Why Students Choose Their Studies And Why They Leave

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Abstract

Understanding why students choose different academic fields and addressing student dropout are crucial challenges for higher education institutions. Motivations for choosing different fields vary, from personal traits to societal factors. Reasons for dropout range from academic struggles to personal challenges across fields like education, arts, journalism, law, business, medicine, and STEM. Possible strategies and prevention measures include academic support services, personal counselling, and career development initiatives. This comprehensive approach aims to foster a supportive environment, empower students, and enhance retention rates. By tailoring programs to meet student needs and addressing common challenges, higher education institutions can better support students in their academic and personal journeys, ultimately contributing to their success and well-being.

Keywords: dropout, student, higher education, dropout strategies

INTRODUCTION

Students enter higher education with different expectations and desires. Students themselves choose study programs and fields of education, so they are the primary users of services in higher education (Sikošek & Kodrič, 2011). Higher education institutions strive to ensure that students are highly satisfied and receive quality services, which, on the one hand, reduces the dropout rate of existing students. On the other, it is an effort to increase interest and influence decisions about choosing a field of study at a higher education institution (Sikošek & Kodrič, 2011). However, this has proven to be quite difficult to accomplish since the dropout rates in higher education have not lowered, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The numbers were concerning (Olmedo-Cifuentes & Martínez-León, 2022).

This paper explores the ongoing debate of student dropout in higher education, an area that, despite extensive research, continues to seek effective solutions. It delves into the complexities of the dropout issue by reviewing studies across various disciplines, aiming to shed light on the choices students make, the reasons they leave their studies, and potential strategies to mitigate this problem. The findings related to students' decisions and dropout motives are presented in a structured format using tables for clear visualization. The core research questions the paper seeks to address are the variation in dropout rates across different academic fields and the identification of viable solutions to combat this issue.

STUDENT CHOICES

From business to STEM fields, each discipline has the power to draw in an individual whose goals and motivations align with the higher education institution of his or her choosing. Knowing the distinct motives behind each student's decisions in a range of academic disciplines might help identify reasons for student dropout and provide possible solutions.

Here we list some motivations and personality traits of students and their preferences about choosing the academic field:

- *Business Studies*: Students, who prefer business studies often show distinct personality traits characterized by high levels of perfectionism, emotional stability, and determination. They may be less pleasant and open to new experiences (Lounsbury et al., 2009). Research indicates that students who choose business studies as their main academic discipline show a higher tolerance for cheating, which raises ethical concerns about their trustworthiness in the business world (Elias, 2015).
- *Education*: The choice to follow a career in education is often caused by a blend of philanthropic, internal, and external motivations and beliefs. Individuals devoted to teaching are motivated by the desire to make a positive impact on society, assist people in need, and grow future generations (Jungert et al., 2014). In addition, internal factors, like the joy of teaching and using expertise from various fields, play a crucial role alongside external factors such as job security and other benefits (Jungert et al., 2014).
- *Arts and Humanities*: Students who select the field of arts and humanities are motivated by a variety of factors, encompassing personal beliefs and individual or career goals, and have a desire to contribute to the whole society. These motivations correspond with the individual benefits anticipated from their selected area of study (Skatova & Ferguson, 2014). Some students genuinely show their preference for subjects like literature and history, while others view these programs as academically less demanding, in other words, the easy route to advanced education.
- *Administration and Law*: Students, who choose the field of law frequently show certain attributes like critical thinking, competitiveness, and an interest in making money (Malkin & Sharma, 2022). In contrast to mainstream belief, success in the academic field of law relies more on personality traits like self-reliance and discipline rather than

other reasons (Fagan & Squitiera, 2002). Students often are drawn to the lure of prestige and intellectual euphoria when studying law.

- *Medicine*: The motivations for undertaking medical studies are diverse, ranging from personal fascination and commitment to family influence and a desire to help others (Khairani et al., 2018). While many students are driven by altruistic motives and a genuine concern for healthcare, the impact of family influence cannot be underestimated. The prestigious field of medicine draws individuals eager to make a tangible difference in the lives of others and contribute to the improvement of society.
- *STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)*: In the fields related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), the initial introduction to mathematical and scientific concepts significantly influences students' inclinations and professional ambitions. Positive attitudes towards mathematics and strong self-confidence are closely linked to a propensity to engage in STEM fields (Wang, 2013). The provision of equal pre-university educational opportunities and support during higher education are essential for promoting inclusivity in STEM areas.

In summary, students' decisions regarding various academic fields result from a complex interplay of personal characteristics, social status, and individual motivations. It is vital for higher education institutions to understand these traits comprehensively to adapt their programs to align with student needs.

Table 1: Motivations for Student choice and unique student characteristics in different fields

Academic Discipline	Motivations for Student Choice & Unique Characteristics	References
Business Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High conscientiousness, emotional stability, assertiveness - Lack of agreeableness and openness to new experiences - Tolerance for academic dishonesty - Ethical concerns in the business realm 	Lounsbury et al. (2009), Elias (2015)
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Altruistic desire to make a societal impact - Intrinsic joy of teaching - Extrinsic factors like job security - Commitment to societal improvement - Continual growth during career 	Jungert et al. (2014)
Arts and Humanities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal interests - Desire to assist others - Perception of programs as less academically demanding - Passion for subjects - Perceived easier path to higher education 	Skatova & Ferguson (2014)
Administration and Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analytical thinking - Competitiveness - Profit-oriented mindset - Prestige and intellectual challenge - Personality traits influence success 	Malkin & Sharma (2022), Fagan & Squitiera (2002)
Medicine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal interest and passion - Family influence - Desire to assist others - Noble profession appeal - Impact on societal improvement 	Khairani et al. (2018)

STEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Early exposure to math and science - Positive attitudes toward mathematics - Strong self-efficacy beliefs 	Wang (2013)
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Author's summary.

REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT OF A PARTICULAR ACADEMIC FIELD

Students dropping out is a phenomenon which occurs when students leave their academic programs without completing their studies. It is a complex problem that impacts all fields of study and all higher education institutions. Here we list the most important reasons for dropping out of studies by identified academic fields:

- *Business*: The main reasons that cause business students to drop out are financial issues, academic underperformance, and lack of cognitive ability (Bennett, 2003). Additionally, a lack of prior mathematical knowledge and lack of subject-specific know-how also added to the higher dropout rates in undergraduate studies (Arnold & Rowaan, 2014).
- *Education*: According to Tinto's theory (1975), which focuses on the importance of academic and social inclusion, it is said that the challenge of being able to blend into the academic environment is one of the leading reasons for student dropout (Tinto, 1975). According to Bohndick (2020), no significant differences in the reasons for dropout were found among the students in pedagogical programs in comparison to their counterparts in other disciplines. The study noted, however, a decrease in dropout rates among pedagogical students because of their clearly defined career path (Bohndick, 2020).
- *Arts and Humanities*: Research carried out by the University of Arts in Australia sheds light on the many factors contributing to dropping out of higher education (Mestan, 2016). Mestan (2016) identified different challenges that plagiarize many students, including poor information about study choices, a sense of directionlessness, and personal issues such as health problems and financial constraints.
- *Journalism*: Although there is a lack of research to identify the main reasons behind journalism students' dropout rates, insights into the factors contributing to success in journalism can help infer potential reasons for student dropout. De Burgh (2003) stated that highly appraised journalists require a combination of academic knowledge, journalism-specific experiences and transferable skills from many different fields. With this information, it is reasonable to suspect that challenges to academic demands, different expectations in the profession and personal issues could be attributed to student dropout in journalism. Still, additional research on this topic is required.
- *Administration and Law*: Dropout from the law study field may be correlated with benefits of job opportunities in other fields, financial problems and a lack of diverse background, thus being closed to different minorities and cultures (Haas, 2006). The issues, such as limited career opportunities, economic challenges and feelings of isolation, that minority students face in their time on campus quite often contribute to them dropping out (Carrington & Conley, 1976).
- *Medicine*: Reasons for dropping out of medical schools have been attributed to academic issues, limited social support and burnout. The most prevalent of these is burnout because it mostly stems from inefficient coping strategies, large quantities of stress and limited support networks (Abreu Alves et al., 2022).

- *STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics)*: Dropout in STEM fields could be linked to difficulties in adjusting to new environments, poor academic performance, stereotypes (especially between men and women), lower grades in upper secondary education and different social requirements. These problems are part of a more complex issue that plagues many students and higher education institutions. Still, it is necessary to address them so they can be properly handled (Wang, 2013).

Table 2: Table of issues students face in different academic fields

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Education		X		X		X							X			
Arts				X	X											
Journalism		X		X		X										
Law	X					X	X	X			X					
Business	X	X	X							X		X				
Medicine		X							X							X
STEM		X											X	X	X	
SUM of X	2	5	1	3	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1

Author's summary. Legend: 1- Financial issues, 2- Academic struggles, 3- Lack of direction, 4- Personal challenges, 5- Uninformed subject choices, 6- Career expectations, 7- Job market factors, 8- Lack of diversity, 9- Limited social backing, 10- Lack of cognitive ability, 11- Social isolation, 12- Inadequate preparation, 13- Adjustment difficulties, 14- Stereotypes, 15- Poor GPA, 16- Burnout.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO PREVENT STUDENT DROPOUT

We used Table 2 as a reference point, to point out many reasons for student dropout. Some reasons have been more frequent than others (e.g., academic struggles, personal challenges, career expectations etc.) and should be properly addressed by practical strategies.

Academic struggles

Higher education institutions could take proactive steps to prevent academic underperformance and struggle, thus reducing dropout rates. Here we list some possible strategies:

1. *Academic support services*: For high education it is important to establish various academic support services if they want to decrease student dropout. Many problems could be solved with simple and effective tutoring programs and peer mentoring initiatives. Additionally, investments could be made in the direction of quality and engaging online tutoring, courses and supportive labs (Britto & Rush, 2013).
2. *Time management workshops*: Bad time management is one of the primary factors for not succeeding in academics. Thus, it is important for higher education institutions to implement time management workshops that could be implemented during orientation or as a subject during the first year of education. Quality time management does correlate with better academic results, and it is better to learn them at the beginning rather than later (Trentepohl et al., 2022).
3. *Study skills training and seminars within the curriculum*: By embedding study skills within the first-year curriculum or even during orientation, it would allow students to

learn many different strategies and skills, which they could use to develop their own study style and it would deliver them the best academic results (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002).

4. *Environment*: There should be a focus on creating an atmosphere where students are encouraged to open up when they encounter difficult situations (Erickson et al., n.d.). This would improve the overall usefulness of the above-mentioned solutions, and it would decrease the gap between female and male students who join a course (Weaver-Hightower, 2010). It has been proven that men in academia are less willing to open up when they encounter difficult situations due to cultural and stereotypical beliefs (Marrs & Sigler, 2011).

Personal Challenges

Higher education should address the mental state of their students very seriously since it not only improves student health but also improves or stabilizes academic success (Ibrahim et al., 2013; Mihăilescu et al., 2016). Therefore, we list two practical solutions that higher education institutions can implement:

1. *Affordable counselling services*: It is well known that counselling is costly and that a large percentage of students suffer from depression (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Thus, it is important that higher education institutions place a high priority on the mental health of their students. The best approach to achieve this is by providing students with accessible counselling services from staff members who are equipped to handle their complex needs (Kassin et al., 2019).
2. *Coping strategy workshops*: According to Nagase et al. (2009), studies have found a positive correlation between depression and effective coping strategies, particularly problem-solving techniques. This suggests that coping strategies can be used as an evidence-based cognitive behavioural approach for treating depression in patients. (Nagase et al., 2009). (Ahorsu et al., 2021; Mihăilescu et al., 2016). Thus, it is important that higher education promotes this kind of workshop since it clearly produces a positive result on students' mental health and academic performance (Ahorsu et al., 2021; Mihăilescu et al., 2016).

Career Expectations

Most of the time, when students have to decide which career they should pursue and what they want to do in life, they need to have a certain level of education in a specific field. That process usually demands a lot of time and effort. Thus, it would be a waste of time and money when the career they wanted to pursue was not what they had expected a few years ago. So, to support students in their career endeavours and wishes, higher education institutions can do the following:

1. *Career assessment tests and orientation days*: Career assessment tests allow students to better understand what kind of profession they should follow and would give them the most satisfaction (Kahn et al., 2002). The information gathered from these tests can be used to determine which type of student has the highest chance of finishing the course (Kahn et al., 2002). This information helps students make an informed decision about which higher education institution to visit on orientation day, as that is when they will form their final opinion about the chosen study (Abel et al., 2007).

2. *Career counselling centre (CCC)*: Since the transition from education to work is quite a difficult experience that requires significant change (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Studies suggest that success in the transition phase is usually positively associated with prior knowledge and experience, allowing career counsellors to play an important role in preparing students for the transition process (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). These CCCs would allow students to receive guidance from professionals in their respective fields, so students can get direct information about their chosen profession, and that would allow them to make better decisions (Carson & Reed, 2015).
3. *Interactive workshops*: Workshops can be designed in a way that students receive first-hand experiences in their chosen profession (Williams, 2011). What they offer is the usefulness of knowledge that is used in the field and is subsequently obtained by students of the chosen field. (B Modise, 2016). This model allows students to expand their horizons and give them feedback to better understand their strengths and shortcomings (Modise, 2016).

CONCLUSION

When addressing the topic of student dropout, it is helpful that we delve deep into the motivations of students, their expectations and how these influence academic decisions and the issues that they encounter within the preferred fields. To be able to tailor programs to better serve students and reduce dropout, some attention on understanding the specific attributes of people, that are required in different disciplines should be given.

To better understand the possible solutions, it is important to first understand the most common reasons for student attrition in college. These included academic difficulties, personal struggles and unmet career expectations. Using this information, we can elevate student success by using proactive measures like academic support services, career counselling and many more. Different strategies, where practicality and student well-being are at the forefront, can lower dropout rates and motivate students to reach their academic potential.

Even so, there is a need for further research, since this paper is only an overview of limited literature, including quantitative and qualitative methods. This would deepen our understanding of the complexities that student choices and consequently student dropout presents. Hence, further studies are suggested in this field and more similar research should be conducted, to enhance our understanding on the matter.

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