
Understanding College Student Attrition: The Case of Voluntary Withdrawal at Unity University College

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore why academically able students at Unity University College (UUC) discontinue their education. The study focused on part-time students who came to UUC with a strong motivation and commitment for higher education but decided to leave even when they had the required academic standard to continue learning. The study examined attrition from the students' perspective and probed their individual stories about their reason for dropping out, stopping out, and reenrolling. It identified reasons that include financial problems and a wide range of factors related to institutional support. The attrition-persistence of the part-time students was found to be the function of the interaction among the student, the institution, and the level of financial and employment support students received.

Introduction

The issue of student-success in completing their studies at Colleges or Universities and graduate with diplomas and degrees is affected by a number of factors both internal and external to the student. Internal factors concern such points as the student's level of commitment to exert the time and the energy required to stand the rigor of academic work at the tertiary level and his/her academic preparedness for college/university education prior to enrollment in a certain field of study. External factors include such issues as support the student receives from parents, friends etc. and the academic and social environment within the educational institutions.

The most important factor, which is known to affect a student's chance of success, as measured by persistence to graduation seems to be whether or not the student has the appropriate level of academic preparedness (Cuseo,

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Joe 2003). Academic under preparedness on the part of a student usually results in academic dismissal or failure. Several studies, Laekemariam (1994); Asmerom, et al. (1989); Yalew (2003); Allen (1999); Conway (1996) corroborate that academic under preparedness as measured by the level of previous academic performance and/or college/university GPA is the major cause of student attrition in most colleges and universities.

Other reasons students discontinue their education include lack of family support, financial constraints, problems of adjustment to a new learning environment and intervening employment opportunities. Problems of socialization that result in anxiety, lack or shortage of student-support services such as lack of proper advising-counseling on the part of the institution and many others that we do not yet fully understand could be mentioned as factors that lead students to discontinue their education. Although there has been an increasing interest since 1970s to study college student attrition which has resulted in quite a number of studies particularly in North America, there seems to be very little effort and research work on the problem in the Ethiopian context. There are only very limited research works on the magnitude and causes of college student attrition in the last 12 years. The first study, to my knowledge, is Asmerom, et al. (1989). However, concomitant with the growing demands of parents, the general public, students and the government for greater accountability, effectiveness and efficiency, the issue of college student attrition has attracted more attention from the Ethiopian educators than ever before in the last ten years. Most of these studies Temesgen (1991); Lakemariam (1994); Gebreselassie cited in Yalew (2003); Tamire (1997); Yalew (2003) studied the attrition problem at government colleges and universities.

The present study, however, attempted to investigate student attrition in the context of a private higher education institution by taking Unity University College (UUC) as a case. This institution, which will be referred to as UUC hereafter is the pioneer private institution of higher education. It was established in March 1998. Student attrition and retention is a pivotal issue for UUC as it is for all other private undertakings which entirely depend on

the finance generated from students. The institution did not seem to face any serious problem of student enrollment and attrition in its initial years. This was partly because of its advent into the Ethiopian educational arena as a pioneer at a time when there was a gap waiting to be filled to meet the interests and needs of many thousands of youths and adult population.

However, with the expansion or even 'explosion' of private colleges and university colleges in subsequent years the issue of attrition and retention has become more serious and detrimental not only to the success of the colleges/university colleges various operations and academic programs but also to their survival. New private colleges and university colleges throughout the country have now set a highly competitive atmosphere in terms of securing high student enrollment each academic year.

Therefore, in view of the situation described above, there is an ever-increasing pressure on UUC to seriously consider the rate, causes and magnitude of student attrition and retention. In this study, therefore, an attempt was made to understand the reasons for many students' discontinuation of an educational program. The study in particular is concerned with students who discontinue their education for non-academic reasons. It does not include students who leave UUC because of academic dismissal.

Operational Definition of Terms

Attrition: refers to students who leave a program of study and the institution before completion.

Voluntary withdrawals: refers to students eligible to continue but who decide to discontinue.

Drop out: Students who both formally and informally leave a course (stop attending) before completion.

Stop out: Students who discontinue for a while and then reenroll after a semester or so.

Institutional Support: The provision of accurate, reliable and timely information, academic advisement and counseling, tutorials, and the protection of students' rights.

Academic Integration: Students' interest and ability to focus on learning and academic activities, their interactions with instructional staff, and their classroom participation and academic performance.

Social Integration: Students' involvement in college/university, social activities, their sense of social belonging, the development of friendship as well as "goal commitment" (to graduating with a certain degree) and "institutional commitment" (to remaining at a particular institution).

Review of Related Literature

The Problem of Student Attrition

Student attrition in colleges and universities seems to be a universal phenomenon. After reviewing over 20 years of research on attrition in America and Canada, Day (2001) concluded, "University student attrition is a pervasive, relatively stable phenomenon" (P. 1). Seidman (1996) on his part states that overall attrition remains the same in spite of various retention strategies designed on the basis of results of twenty-years of research on attrition in American universities. Studies on North American Universities have also established that there is a marked decrease in graduation rate. Tinto (1993), for example reported that the graduation rate for American Universities declined from 52.6% in 1983 to 46.7% in 1992. Nicholl and Sutton (2001) in an introductory report for Tertiary Education Advisory Committee (New Zealand), reported a 42% attrition rate (as measured by failure to graduate) in Canada. At the 11th Annual Conference of the European Access Network held in Prato, Italy on 19 June 2002 Tinto (2002) aptly summarizes the magnitude of the attrition problem by saying "It remains a fact that for many institutions in United States dropout is as often as graduation" (P.1).

While the magnitude of the problem in the international context seems well documented, data on both student attrition and retention in the Ethiopian context is either unavailable or scanty and unorganized. A few studies, Asmerom et al. (1989); Temesgen (1991); and Solomon (2003) attempted to investigate the magnitude of the attrition problem reported a considerable rate which requires a more organized, longitudinal and continuous research. For example, after analyzing drop-out cases from a total of 3,973 students enrolled in six different academic departments at UUC, Solomon (2003) reported 38.7% attrition rate only in one academic year. The findings from this study suggested that there seems to be a felt need for altering and improving the system for recording and keeping clear attrition and retention data since the issue of student retention for private higher education institution in Ethiopia is increasingly becoming a matter of economic survival. On the need to commit themselves to issues of student attrition and retention on the part of institutions, Rounds (1984) has the following to say: "As colleges scramble for students, then, it becomes increasingly important to characterize the potential dropout, to determine the reasons why he/she might withdraw, and to see if procedures and programs could be established to help reduce those numbers that are going back out the open door" (P. 1).

Causes of Student Attrition

A review of the research literature on causes of student attrition reveals that students discontinue their education from colleges and Universities for a complex combination of reasons not yet fully investigated and understood (Day, Victor 2001). Conway (2000) summarized the causes of attrition as "Multifaceted with no single reason predominating and most students citing combinations of reasons." This implies that many reasons are interacting with each other and causing students to discontinue their education and leave college or university.

From among the major causes of attrition identified through research, low academic performances as measured by GPA seems to be the most

important cause and predictor of attrition. Allen (1999); Day et al. (1987); Pageau (2002) noted that GPA is usually the best single predictor. The similar finding is also reported by Asmeorm et al. (1989); Lakemariam (1994); Yalew (2003), who identified low-academic performance to be the major cause of student attrition in the Ethiopian context. However, since low-academic performance itself is affected by other variables such as plan to leave, attrition and college GPA may have an interacting casual relationship. A corollary to college GPA (low-academic performance) variable as a predictor of student attrition is the level of students' academic preparedness as measured by their high school performance. Allen (1999), for instance, found that high school performance is an important predictor of attrition next to college GPA. However, some researchers have also noted that high school performance does not have any predictive value at all (Berger and Braxton, 1998; Ruddock, Hanson and Moss, 1999). Research seems to have established high school performance as a statistically significant predictor although it explains only a limited portion of the variance in attrition (Day, 2001).

Research has also identified the impact of institutional culture and pedagogical practice on student achievement and success, and by implication, their contribution for discontinuing education. The staff newspaper of the Faculty at University of Maryland, USA (OUTLOOK, 6 May 1997) reported the detrimental contributions of student involvement in college/University activities and the effectiveness of faculty and teaching methods. Yalew (2003) found that such institutional factors as lack of information and guidance and counseling, poor food and health facilities and problems of potable water affect students' learning and hence contribute to attrition. In the same study students reported that their result can be significantly affected if their field of study is assigned by the institution. Gebereselassie (1998), Tinto (2002) and Husain cited in Yalew (2003) argued that support from the educational institutions affects students' persistence in more ways than one. For instance, Tinto (2002) observed that many students joining higher learning institutes are not adequately prepared for the rigors of tertiary level education. This calls for a well-organized and

continuous academic and social support from institutions. It can be argued that such a support particularly in the Ethiopian context is either unavailable or is far from satisfactory.

Yalew (2003) in a study on a residential government university employed qualitative methods and found out that lack of institutional support such as: library services, academic advising, dormitory facilities and other student support services like tutorials, study groups and supplemental instruction can be major causes affecting students' persistence.

Research also identifies other categories of causes of college-students attrition of who decide to discontinue their education while they maintain the required GPA to stay. These students are usually referred to as voluntary withdrawals. Smith and Saunders cited in Nicholl and Sutton (2001), found that students who have successfully completed many courses may decide to discontinue before the completion of the whole program for personal, academic or professional reasons. These students may also join another institution later and get their degrees. Tinto (1989) also states "Academic failure accounts for only a third of student attrition nationally. It is but one of a number of reasons that students leave college: the others have little if anything to do with maintaining adequate grades (p.1)."

Smith and Saunders (1988) further commented on the causes of attrition in case of voluntary withdrawals. They did this after analyzing reasons forwarded by part-time degree students as remotely connected to the course. They report such reasons as students' achievement of sufficient knowledge and experience before completion and inability to cope with the demands of the rigor of academic work or failure to enjoy the learning experience. Nicholl and Sutton (2001) described pre-entry attributes such as work commitments/time pressures and social attributes (such as feelings of isolation and alienation; family support and responsibilities; financial and social support) as major causes of voluntary withdrawals.

Perspectives to Understand Attrition

Students' ability and capacity to integrate as fully as possible with the institutional culture and the academic environment is usually taken as a robust indicator of students' chance of success, (Nicholl and Sutton, 2001). The most comprehensive seminal model which constitutes the two variables mentioned above and widely used to understand college student attrition is Tinto's model of academic and social integration, (Tinto 1975 and 1982). Academic integration concerns issues of the quality of students' learning experiences, academic activities and performance, the interaction of students with the faculty and students' classroom experiences (participation). Social integration, on the other hand, refers to issues regarding the importance for students to fully engage and participate in the institution's social activities such as socializing with peers, sense of social belongingness, their overall capacity to integrate with the institution's community and their commitment to the institution as measured by their decision to persist until graduation in the same institution. Hoffman (2000) summarized the essence of Tinto's model as follows: "The attrition-persistence outcome was a result of a longitudinal interaction between the student and the academic and social systems of the college (p.1)."

Empirical evidence on Tinto's model not only supported and proved that it is a robustly useful way of understanding college student attrition but it also established the relative importance of academic and social integration in terms of type of institution (commuter Vs residential) and type of students (full-time Vs part-time). Studies by Ashar and Skenes (1993); Pascarella, and Chapman (1983) found out that academic integration is a more important reason for attrition primarily at commuter colleges and universities while social integration is a more important predictor of attrition at residential colleges and universities.

However, other studies Metzner and Bean (1987); Bean and Metzner (1985); Ryder (1994); Sandler (2000) applied Tinto's model to study the causes of attrition of non-residential commuting part-time students and found

that neither academic integration nor social integration is an important predictor. They have found that such factors as clear academic and career goals, financial constraints, intent to leave and other family and personal problems are important predictors of attrition. Pageau (2000) investigated reasons forwarded by part-time students in the University of Quebec and reported that intent to get a degree was the strongest predictor of attrition.

Therefore, the addition of the case of part-time students particularly by Metzner and Bean (1987) broadened Tinto's model and provided an additional perspective to investigate and understand college student attrition in a rather more comprehensive manner.

The new perspective developed as an offshoot of Tinto's model of academic and social integration is of paramount importance to understand the attrition of part-time students for whom such issues as financial problems, life problems and lack of support from people outside the institution are more important than matters related to social and academic integration. Understanding the causes of attrition of part-time students from this perspective also implies a methodological shift in research in the area.

Hoffman (2000) observed a large number of studies on attrition which employed survey methods and were conducted within a time frame of 6 months to 1 year. The studies did not consider the stop-out phenomenon: the cases of students who discontinue for a relatively short period of time due to accidents, pregnancy, temporary heavy work load and personal or family crisis. Hoffman also indicated that statistical analysis of data from persistence-attrition research studies has yielded a total variance (R^2) explained by the main effects in the selected model ranging from 13.9% to 47%.

The studies have provided less than 50% of the explanation for student attrition. Many of these quantitative studies had small sample size and less than 50% return rates. Hoffman (2000), Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda

(1993) also warned that the generalizability of the findings from the quantitative studies should be considered very carefully since the issue of persistence differ depending on setting, type of student and type of institution.

Thus, since quantitative studies do not sufficiently explain the cause of college student attrition, researchers have employed qualitative techniques to complement results from quantitative studies and better understand in particular the attrition cases of part-time students who attend college amid such factors as work and family commitments.

The present study investigates why students at UUC discontinue their education despite their maintaining the required GPA to persist. This became a topic of interest to the researcher since an increasing number of both full-time and part-time students recently left UUC (as many as a 100 per month) without being dismissed for low academic performance. Thus, the major research question is: Why do students with adequate GPA discontinue their education at UUC? Why do students with the required GPA persist to leave?

Methodology

Research Design

The major purpose of this study was to understand the reasons students who decide to discontinue learning at UUC have despite meeting the minimum required academic standard. The study attempted to explore from the participants' point of view the reasons they enroll into a program of study and then discontinue after a semester or so because of reasons not related to their academic performance. To this end, the issue of attrition is approached holistically and an attempt is made to investigate attrition from the students' perspective and to probe into their reasons for discontinuation. Therefore, a research design that allows the participants to express their

views, ideas, thoughts, experiences, beliefs and memories freely and at length was employed.

Instruments of Data Collection

The data obtained from unstructured in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Besides, the students' academic records were reviewed to secure information about their time of enrollment, withdrawal, and GPA. The researcher himself collected the data since the quality of the data heavily depends on the quality of empathy and rapport established with the participants of the study. During the interviews proper attempts were made to probe into the stories of why the participants discontinued education.

Data Analysis

Analysis is mainly based on thick descriptions of interview transcripts and information from the research literature. The analysis was guided by six major perspectives that emerged from the stories the participants narrated as reasons for discontinuing their education.

The Setting and Participants

Following the formulation of the new Education and Training Policy in 1994 private higher education institutions flourished first in the capital (Addis Ababa) and later in the regions. At present, there are over 50 accredited private institutions of higher education, which offer a range of academic and vocational programs of study to a diverse and wide range of young and adult students. The large majority of these students have been deprived of access to higher education despite having both the pass grade (GPA of 2:00) in the national school leaving examination and a modest level of academic preparedness for academic work at the tertiary level. Most of these students could afford the cost of higher education if the chance were available.

Generally speaking, the context of private higher education is characterized by sole-proprietorship or partnership style of ownership. The administrative scheme is composed of largely either veterans from government higher education institutions or personnel from the civil service and friends or relatives of the owners. The academic staffs are drawn from both government colleges and high schools and novice teachers. The financial background is entirely dependent on tuition fee from students. The premises are housed in rented buildings built for other purposes. The general educational setting has a lot of dynamism as evidenced by a more relaxed and intimate student-faculty relationship and the introduction of innovative academic programs.

Additional characteristics of the private higher education milieu in Ethiopia include the following salient points.

1. The student population, by and large, are either academically under prepared or they are people who interrupted formal education for a period as long as 10 to 15 years as compared to the student population in government institutions
2. There are modest provisions of library facilities and places for self and group study
3. There are haphazard decision making practices and unsystematic procedure as regards staff recruitment, promotion and other related privileges or fringe benefits.
4. There is a challenging environment to institutionalize the overall operations and administration of the institutions.
5. Business motives predominate issues of standard, quality of teaching/learning and overall academic excellence as evidenced by student enrollment, teaching-load and commitment to reinvest the money generated from tuition for the improvement of the standard and quality of education
6. A very high rate of teacher burn-out caused by excessive teaching-load (some required and some over-time) is observable.

7. An educational setting of dissonance caused by incongruous rules and regulations of the Ministry of Education with the objective reality of the country and the international trend.

The particular setting for this study is UUC, which perhaps is the most dynamic, controversial, and popular of all the private higher education institutions in the country. Established in March 1998, it not only pioneered private higher education institution but also it blossomed into an educational institution that was able to win the trust and respect of the public during its initial years. It has currently over 10,000 students enrolled in over 11 academic departments which are organized under six faculties. Four of its degree programs and seven of its diploma programs are accredited by the Ministry of Education.

The participants of this study were 68 students contacted through colleagues, friends and their classmates. They are part-time students who discontinued their education while maintaining a GPA of 2.4 and above. Preliminary interviews with all the participants enabled the researcher to exhaust and categorize reasons forwarded and group similar reasons together. The preliminary interview was followed by an in-depth interview. Eight students whose stories were found to incorporate all causes of attrition mentioned by the 68 research participants took part in the interview. This number is also considered to be a representative data since all possible perspectives seem to have been used.

The Results

Tables 1 and 2 below present the participants' personal and educational data using pseudo names.

Table 1: Participants' Personal Data

| No | Name of student | Gender | Age | Marital Status | Remarks |
|-----------|------------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | Debebe | M | 27 | Married | Lost his job while studying at UUC |
| 2 | Tizita | F | 29 | Single | Lack of information and convenient scheduling troubled her a lot |
| 3 | Himanot | F | 22 | Single | Encountered family Problem that affected her education |
| 4 | Gelila | F | 23 | Married | Sexually harassed by her teacher |
| 5 | Habtamu | M | 37 | Married | Left UUC's because of decision to increase the fee by 30% |
| 6 | Addisu | M | 43 | Married | Frequent business travels affected class attendance |
| 7 | Aster | F | 31 | Married | Uncertainty about her academic major |
| 8 | Belachew | M | 28 | Single | Intervening opportunity to go to America |

Table 2: Participant's Educational Data

| No | Name of student | Time of Discontinuation | Program of study (extension or regular degree diploma) | Field of Study | GPA when discontinued |
|----|-----------------|-------------------------|--|----------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Debebe | After 5 Semesters | Extension (Degree) | MIS* | 2.80 |
| 2 | Tizita | After 2 Semesters | Extension (Degree) | Management | 2.60 |
| 3 | Himanot | After 5 Semesters | Extension (Degree) | Accounting | 2.73 |
| 4 | Gelila | After 5 Semesters | Extension (Diploma) | Accounting | 3.40 |
| 5 | Habtamu | After 4 Semesters | Extension (Degree) | Economics | 3.00 |
| 6 | Addisu | After 3 Semesters | Extension (Degree) | Accounting | 2.62 |
| 7 | Aster | After 2 Semesters | Extension (Degree) | Accounting | 2.40 |
| 8 | Belachew | After 3 Semesters | Extension (Degree) | MIS | 3.00 |

* MIS= Management Information System

As indicated in the research design, the participants were asked an open-ended question that attempted to elicit reasons (s) for their discontinuation of a program of study. A report of the individual stories they told is presented below using their pseudo names to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

The first perspective that recurs in the stories told is related to financial reasons. For instance, Debebe declared, "The major reason for my discontinuation is the financial problem I faced after I lost my job." He also remarked "I found it extremely difficult to support my family, and at the same time, pay my school-fee. I was thus forced to interrupt my study at UUC." Haimanot stated "My aunt with whom I am currently living and who covers all my educational expenses decided to quit her job after testing positive to HIV. This significant event affected my education in at least two major ways. First, I had to stay home and take care of her as there is no one else living with us. Second, I had no one else to cover my education. Thus, I decided to withdraw and leave UUC hoping that I would one day come back."

A corollary to the stories above is the financial problem caused by the unexpected decision to increase the school fee by UUC. Habtamu said, "When the college decided to raise the fee by 30 percent, I found the decision so capricious. I knew that I could not afford that much additional money since it took me over two years to save the money to cover my school-fee according to the previous rate of payment. I have, therefore, considered it better to leave UUC and join other private colleges where the school-fee is reasonable and affordable." Regrettably, UUC reversed that decision at a later date to resolve the dispute over the increment of the fee. Habtamu expressed his opinion by saying "I wish I could have stayed at UUC. I still regret, especially when I think of the way that dispute was resolved." UUC was actually forced to reverse its decision by the Ministry of Education.

Another major perspective that represents a considerable number of voluntary withdrawals from UUC concerns problems related to class and exam scheduling and lack of transparent and efficient communication. "In hindsight," says Tizita, "I now believe that I would not have discontinued my studies at UUC if I had the support, cooperation and proper guidance of the college." She laments "I fell victim to UUC'S insensitive, rigid and perfunctorily designed class and exam schedules. I was, for example, once denied entry into classes I had officially registered for. I came one week after the beginning of class according to UUC's new schedule but this change in the schedule was not officially communicated to me. On another occasion I missed two final examinations because of the change made in the initial schedule. The first schedule was changed without us knowing the new arrangement."

Tizita also expressed her dismay over the treatment and the reception rendered by the staff of UUC. She describes the frustration and disappointment she encountered on one occasion as follows: "Everyone I talked to gives me conflicting information. When I asked about the procedure of requesting for an exemption from courses, I took elsewhere, the receptionist who told me to come at a later date. The department's secretary

told me that the head of the department is available only at a specified time (although I was told during the orientation program that students are welcome any time during working hours). The people at the Registrar's Office gave me wrong forms to complete and ask for an exemption. They also explained a procedure that is difficult to understand for someone like me (a new student). I wondered whether I was the only student facing this problem. However, the cohort of new students experiencing similar problems told me the same story as we stand in long queue waiting indefinitely to get somebody's signature."

Tizita also commented on the very serious problem she faced to get permission from her boss to come to the university college to take care of such activities as exemption from courses and adding and dropping of courses. She said " I come to UUC during working hours after getting permission from my boss. Understandably, no boss would be happy to let an employee be absent from duty for three or more hours four times in a week. I felt so embarrassed to stand in front of my boss and tell him that I am not yet done with the add/drop business after spending something like half a day at the College. The College did not have any meaningful system of ensuring the responsibility and accountability of its administrative as well as academic staff."

She told me that she was very surprised to hear that the deadline for adding and dropping of courses was over and she could not add the courses she needed to add. Tizita exclaimed "That was a real scandal! I was there the whole week but the institution was simply unable to provide me with the service I deserved and the service the College has legal obligations to offer. It is even more scandal that I was held responsible for not adding the course on time." She concluded "This haphazard decision making, and lack of the provision of timely, reliable and accurate information, affected my education and finally forced me to leave UUC." Tizita also told me that she has no intention of coming back to UUC. She added "I think I will definitely advise anyone I know, especially, my bothers, sisters and relatives not to join UUC

since I do not want them to suffer by being victims of such a disorganized educational system.”

A third perspective that emerged as regards causes of attrition at UUC concerns problems related to work commitments affecting class attendance. Addisu recalls “My biggest problem was the poor attendance record I had due to my frequent business travels.” He commented on his lack of support, encouragement and sympathy from his organization and UUC. I could sense his disappointment and frustration when Addisu explained “My boss could have helped me by exempting me at least from business trips that take longer than three days, if he had appreciated my efforts to go to college by saving money from my meager salary. Addisu does not also seem to appreciate UUC’S attendance policy. He said “The College has very rigid and stringent rules and regulations concerning class attendance. There is absolutely no flexibility that tries to entertain the cases of students who are forced to miss classes due to unavoidable work commitments.” Addisu regrets to have to recall his decision to interrupt his studies. “I was forced to withdraw against my will three-semesters after I was enrolled in the department of Economics. There is no way I can pay the school-fee without fulfilling my contractual obligation with my employers.”

A fourth perspective that accounts for the attrition of voluntary withdrawals is uncertainty on the part of students about their educational or occupational goal. Aster told me “I was first enrolled in the Department of Accounting to study accounting. She explained, “Although I work in the finance department of a certain government organization, I have never appreciated what I am doing. I have always thought of changing my career to something that involves either human resource management or planning. However, I was registered in the Department of Accounting because many people I consulted advised me to do so. They advised me of the better employment prospects after graduation and a possible promotion I could secure in my present job.” She added, “I now fully realize that was a big mistake, since I have always known for sure that I have neither the talent not the motivation to study anything of accounting.” Aster argued that her two-semester stay in

the Department of Accounting proved to her that she does not really quite like accounting. She recalls "My experience of studying accounting for two- semesters turned out to be frustrating. For one thing, the content of the courses presented in class were boring to me since much of it deals with numbers and figures. Secondly, I found the instructors and their teaching methods not only dull but also so intimidating. The instructors are more interested in determining "grades" for the course. Aster told me that she decided to withdraw and think very seriously about her career goal. She expressed the final resolution "I interrupted my studies for six months and re-enrolled at the department of management to major in marketing management. I now feel that I have made the right decision since I am happily experiencing every aspect of the courses I am taking."

A fifth perspective concerns intervening opportunities such as the chance to go abroad or an employment opportunity. From the exit interviews I conducted while I was the Assistant Dean of the Gerji campus, I had the opportunity to witness that as many as twenty students (most of them bright students) withdraw per month. These students went to colleges and universities abroad, in particular, to USA, Canada, UK and South Africa. Belachew, who was enrolled in the Department of MIS, told me that he withdrew after three semesters because of the intervening opportunity he had to go to America. He explained "I discontinued my study since I decided to go to America. He said he started to process visa and other travel requirements after he officially withdrew from UUC. However, the process did not only take a very long time but it also finally failed after I spent a whole year doing nothing but filling in and mailing forms and visiting the Embassy and various offices for interviews and other communications. I wish I did not interrupt my study. I could have handled the matter while attending my classes." He said: "I really regret wasting one year because of a hasty decision to withdraw." He told me that he reenrolled and continued his study and at the same time he was following up matters related to his travel to America.

The last perspective arises from the student-teacher relationship, which is believed to be asymmetrical. Gelila Said "I could not believe what I was hearing when my accounting instructor called me to his office only to request me for sexual favors. He tried to convince me that I would receive an "A" grade in his course in return." She added "My immediate reaction was one of utter shock and total disbelief, especially in view of the fact that the teacher himself is married and has three children. He is a mature adult entrusted with the noble task of changing students' behavior through education. Besides, I am also very happily married since January 2003." Gelila told me that she tried to explain to her teacher that she never expected such unethical behavior from him and that she can not meet his request under any circumstances. For the offer he made (an 'A' grade) she replied, "I tried to express my firm belief that I should pass or fail because of my performance and not because of my teacher." Talking about the measures she has taken, she said, "I did not report what has happened to any concerned body of the university college since I believed that no one would seriously consider the case unless I can prove it. So, I was worried, confused and intimidated. When the letter grades for his course were posted I discovered that I was awarded an "F" grade. I knew that this is a penalty for I resisted his sexual advances." Gelila told me that she did not again inform any body including college official and her husband for fear that it might negatively implicate on her further education and her marriage too. However, when she registered for the same course to remove the "F" grade, the same teacher teaching the class told her that there is no way she can pass the course with out meeting his demand. She said, "On this occasion I became convinced that the teacher's recalcitrant and unruly behavior should never go unchecked. I reported the case first orally then in writing to the Office of the Dean where I had a very kind and sympathetic reception and treatment which I did not expect. I also informed my husband and my family but decided to withdraw for some time until the case was resolved. I also needed some kind of rehabilitation." Gelila told me that the case was resolved after a thorough and confidential investigation and deliberation. She added, "During this time, many other female students who were sexually harassed by the same teacher also reported their cases and the teacher was finally proved guilty

beyond any reasonable doubt. He was, therefore, fired for unethical behavior. I reenrolled two semesters after I interrupted my studies.”

The Findings and Implications for Practice

Findings

A closer scrutiny and analysis of the participants’ interview transcripts reveal the following two major points as factors contributing to the discontinuation of their studies at UUC. The first one concerns problems related to lack of financial support and unforeseen crisis (e.g. caring for a relative, losing one’s job etc.). The second comprises a wide range of problems that arise from lack of proper, timely, and relevant institutional support services that have a direct bearing on student persistence. These include, inconvenient class and exam schedules, poor provision of information and communication, capricious decision making, and absence of policy that protect students’ rights from some unethical behaviors like sexual harassment.

The analysis of the transcripts and academic records also showed that many students interrupted their studies for a period ranging from six months to two years and were readmitted. Some did not come back to UUC at all. Others joined another college; still others did not join any other institution until the time of the interview. This leads to a broader definition and understanding of college dropouts. The traditional definition of dropout is “a student who discontinues a program of study and fails to graduate within the specified period of time.” However, this definition does not address the cases of students who reenroll after a while. The word “Stop-out” is used to designate such students in the North American Literature on college student attrition.

Besides, the case of the students who decided to discontinue their studies at UUC and join another college can be considered attrition for UUC but from a system wide perspective it can be argued that it is not attrition at all, since

they have managed to continue their studies. This point also indicated that the concept of attrition can be more complex than is originally thought.

Another major observation revealed from analysis of the interview transcripts is the cases of students who interrupted their education but do not consider themselves as dropouts although the institution may refer to them as 'dropouts'. These students interrupted their studies at UUC for reasons that included seeking lower tuition, more convenient scheduling, and the desire to join a college/university abroad. In leaving UUC they were trying to take measures to pursue their educational goals elsewhere. They did not perceive themselves as dropouts. This observation seems to indicate that students' absence from an institution where they originally begin studying does not seem to be adequate information to understand college-student attrition. The students do not at all feel that they are attritioned; they think they are unfortunate or they are victims of poor employment. Some also think they lack family and institutional support facilities.

A further analysis showed that most of the participants in this research discontinued their education when they encountered a significant event in their lives such as losing one's job, illness of a family member, harassment, and inability to make important decision. This finding revealed that the students really needed a sustained financial, family, employment and institutional support and protection. They indicated that proper academic advisement and guidance, transparent communication, flexible student support services, etc. could have helped them to persist. Tizita said "In hindsight I now believe that I would not have discontinued my study, if I had the support, cooperation and proper guidance from UUC."

The participants' academic status at the time of interview shows that four of them are considered as dropouts by UUC and the other four reenrolled after interrupting their studies for a period as long as 6 months to 2 years. Among the four considered dropouts, Habtamu is currently studying at another private college while the remaining three have not as yet reenroll at UUC or they have not joined another institution. It appears that some of the

participants would like to take some courses at an institution other than UUC during times of financial crisis and comeback later. The reasons advanced are lower-tuition and easier means of transportation.

This study identified the following points as factors that accounted for many students' discontinuation of a program of study as indicated by the research participants. These are:

1. financial problem caused by loss of one's job;
2. family problems resulting in student commitments to care for a member of family and financial constraints;
3. the dispute over the decision of UUC to increase the school-fee;
4. work commitments that make class attendance difficult;
5. Problems related to poor communication of information and inconvenient class and exam schedules;
6. prolonged indecisiveness about, and protracted delay in making commitment to an academic major or career path;
7. seeking or getting better opportunity such as the chance to study abroad; and
8. sexual harassment by teachers.

The findings of this study, by and large, are consistent with the results reported by Metzner and Bean (1987); Bean and Metzner (1985); Ryder (1994); Sandler (2000) who concluded that the attrition of non-residential, commuting part-time students is a function of the interaction among the student, the institution, and the level of financial and employment support received. Tinto's (2002) model of academic and social integration does not seem to account for the attrition of the research participants.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the research have the following practical policy implications for the administration of UUC. Other private institutions of higher learning which share quite a lot of similarities may also have some lessons to learn from these implications.

1. Formulate and enforce a policy that protects students from sexual and other forms of harassment and unfair or unethical treatment by teachers and other employees. To my knowledge, very few HEIs have sexual harassment policy in place.
2. Develop financial payment, aid and support plans especially for part-time students and a loan scheme for students who encounter temporary problems to pay tuition fee on time.
3. Design and provide special academic advising support for students who are uncertain (or undecided) about their academic major or future career plans. This can be done, for example, by establishing an “advisor desk” to be manned by professionals who have the expertise to advise students when they first arrive at UUC.
4. Conduct “exit-interviews” with students who intend to depart, or are in the process of departing.
5. Survey students (by mail, by phone, etc.) who have already withdrawn to assess their reasons for departing and their retrospective perception of the institution.
6. Institute a system of decision making which involves the participation of students especially on matters that directly affect them e.g. school-fee, class schedules.
7. Provide maximum flexibility and simplicity as regards scheduling and class attendance. Add the internet and other forms of electronic communication media to communicate with part-time students.
8. Provide continuous training and retraining for staff who directly come into contact with part-time adult students with a view toward enhancing staff awareness and knowledge about adult education.
9. Create a consortium that would share students, courses, schedules, and faculties.

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