



Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario

Understanding Student Attrition in the Six Greater Toronto Area (GTA) Colleges

Tet S. Lopez-Rabson, Seneca College, and Ursula
McCloy, HEQCO, on behalf of the GTA Colleges
Institutional Research (IR) Network



Published by

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

1, Yonge Street, Suite 2402
Toronto, ON Canada, M5E 1E5

Phone: (416) 212-3893
Fax: (416) 212-3899
Web: www.heqco.ca
E-mail: info@heqco.ca

Cite this publication in the following format:

Lopez-Rabson, T. S. and McCloy, U. (2013). *Understanding Student Attrition in the Six Greater Toronto Area (GTA) Colleges*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.



An agency of the Government of Ontario

The opinions expressed in this research document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or official policies of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario or other agencies or organizations that may have provided support, financial or otherwise, for this project.

© Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2013

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to extend their gratitude to the following senior leaders of the Institutional Research Office for their insights from the conceptualization of this collaborative work to the preparation of the preliminary report.

Centennial College: Philip Alalibo – Faculty (former Manager of the Institutional Research Office)

Durham College: Debbie McKee-Demczyk – Director

George Brown College: Nancy Miyagi – Manager, Special Research & Evaluation Projects (former Manager of the Institutional Research Office)

Humber College: Ruth MacKay – Director

Sheridan College: Don Curzon – Faculty, George Brown College (former Director of the Institutional Research Office, Sheridan College)

Special thanks are also due to the following:

- R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. for survey administration, as well as for producing a preliminary analysis and report.
- Shuping Liu for her careful review at various stages of the report.
- Dr. Henry Decock for his earlier work on the Seneca College Early Leavers Survey in 2004, which served as a foundation for the current study.
- Limin Chen, Rashmi Gupta, Silvana Miller, Sherrie Tu, Pat Van Horne and Jeffrey Waldman for their valuable time and contributions during the various stages of the study.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Research Questions.....	6
Methodology.....	6
Limitations of the Research.....	7
Non-response Bias.....	7
Characteristics and Demographics	8
Factors behind College and Program Choice	10
Sources of Funds for Educational Expenses	12
Living Arrangement while Enrolled	13
In-school Experience	14
Academic and Social Engagement	15
Use of College Facilities and Resources	16
Satisfaction with College Facilities	18
College Assistance or Resources that Could Have Helped.....	19
Overall Satisfaction with College Experience	20
Employment Status while Enrolled	21
Decision to Leave	21
Factors that Influenced Decisions to Leave	21
Primary Reason for Leaving.....	22
Seeking Advice Prior to Leaving	25
Early Leavers with Previous PSE	28
Post-departure Outcomes	31
Immediate Outcome.....	31
Current Outcome.....	32
Departure Factors vs. Immediate and Current Outcome.....	34
Inter-institutional Mobility.....	36
Satisfaction with Departure Decision	36
Intention to Resume Studies.....	38
Positive Attrition	40
Conclusions	42
References	43

Executive Summary

This study is a collaboration between the six colleges in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) – Centennial College, Durham College, George Brown College, Humber College, Seneca College and Sheridan College. The research seeks to better understand why students leave their programs before completion, and the pathways they take after they leave.

In Ontario, less than two-thirds of college students complete their program within twice the prescribed program length. In the GTA, rates are somewhat lower, varying from 55 per cent to 71 per cent. However, these rates do not take into consideration students' mobility pathways; that is, students with a previous postsecondary education (PSE) credential, or students who switch institutions. Additionally, little is known about the experiences of students before they leave, their reasons for leaving, and their labour market outcomes after leaving. While academic achievement is a powerful determinant of whether students persist, many academically proficient students still leave their institutions. An innovative approach in the current study was the linking of administrative data on student grades with a survey administered subsequent to leaving. This study is the first attempt to understand differences between early leavers based on their cumulative grade point average (GPA) upon departure. This was done primarily to enable policy makers, administrators, researchers, and college staff to understand the complex reasons why students leave in relation to their academic achievement.

The study involved a survey of early leavers, undertaken by R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd in 2010. Participants included full-time postsecondary students who were enrolled in Ontario college credentialed programs in the fall of 2007, 2008 or 2009, who had voluntarily left their institutions, and who were not currently enrolled at their 'home' college at the time of the survey. Five of the six colleges delivered the survey by telephone, while one college delivered it online. Survey data were linked to administrative data provided by each college, which included grades, program area and demographics. The survey's themes included background characteristics, in-school experience, pre-departure decision-making, departure reasons, and post-departure outcome. These themes were analyzed according to the academic performance of the student.

Overall, there were 1940 valid respondents to the survey. Seventy-two per cent of respondents had been enrolled in both their first choice institution and program. Substantial portions of them already had a PSE credential, with 7 per cent having a college credential and 11 per cent a university degree. Twelve per cent of the sample had a high GPA, 43 per cent had an average GPA, and 45 per cent had a low GPA. Seventy per cent had withdrawn during their first semester of study.

Academic and Social Engagement

Most leavers had strong academic engagement levels, as demonstrated by how often they completed their homework on time or participated in classroom discussions. However, there was relatively lower participation noted for other teacher-student engaging activities such as discussing with teachers about grades, assignments, ideas, career plans and ambitions. Social engagement was likewise noted to be weak – only about three out of every ten students indicated that they had either attended campus cultural events or participated in student clubs/special interest groups, on-campus community service, or volunteer activities.

Reasons Behind Early Departure

Respondents indicated their primary reason for leaving their 'home' college without completing their program in an open-ended question. Overall, institutional factors explained the departure of 51.8 per cent of leavers. This includes factors such as changes in academic interest/plans (11.5%), lost interest in or dissatisfaction with their program (10.6%), academic issues (8.5%), program specifications/fit (8.1%), faculty/instructor issues (6.1%), decisions to move to university (5.8%) and issues related to campus atmosphere (1.2%). On the other hand, personal factors, such as family/personal/health (17.2%), financial reasons (12.8%), employment (8.9%), location (4.1%) and taking time off (1.1%), accounted for the departure of 44.1 per cent of students. Responses other than these categories accounted for 4.1 per cent.

When comparing across achievement levels, 16 per cent of students with a high GPA left their respective college to attend university, compared to only 6 per cent of academically average and 3 per cent of academically low leavers. Only 4 per cent of high-performing students indicated having lost interest/dissatisfaction with the program. This is lower than academically average (9%) and low (14%) leavers. Furthermore, it was noted that 45 per cent of the latter group discontinued without completing their first semester of study. This is higher than the academically high (11%) and average (15%) leavers.

Seeking Advice Prior to Departure

Slightly less than half of leavers sought advice prior to leaving (48%). A higher rate of students with high grades (56%) did so when compared to academically average (46%) and low-performing students (48%). Overall, leavers sought institutional advice. Faculty members were most likely to be consulted (41%), followed by academic counsellors (18%).

Post-departure Pathways

Participants in the survey were asked what they were doing both three months after leaving their institution, as well as at the time of survey. At the three-month point, 9.2 per cent had left their college to transfer to another institution and were classified as switchers. The strong pull of the labour market is demonstrated by the 60 per cent of leavers who were working either full- or part-time three months after leaving.

At the time of the survey, it became evident that only about half of the leavers could be considered "true" dropouts. Thirty per cent had completed a PSE credential before entering the program or at another time after their initial departure. An additional 20 per cent who had not completed a credential were currently attending school (stopouts). Of the leavers who were "true" dropouts, a large share of them (84.9%) intend to resume their studies. When analyzed by academic achievement group, leavers with a high GPA were less likely to be dropouts compared with academically average and low-GPA leavers.

Positive Attrition

Colleges are playing an increasing role in providing students with alternate routes to university degrees by offering the initial years of study before the student continues on to a university. Current calculations of graduation rates do not account for this movement, which colleges have defined as positive attrition. Across the colleges, 22.4 per cent of leavers without any previous PSE who are currently attending postsecondary education were enrolled in a university located either in or outside the GTA at the time of the survey. Overall, this accounted for 5 per cent of all leavers.

Recommendations

A key observation of this study is early leavers' high degree of mobility. As a result, the creation of an integrated database of PSE students at the provincial level, including colleges, universities and perhaps high schools, would be integral to the calculation of province-wide PSE graduation rates. The continued incorporation of the Ontario Education Number will facilitate this process. At an institutional level, it was noted that six out of every ten students who decided to seek advice prior to leaving consulted institutional resources such as teachers and academic counselling units. This suggests that a college-wide exit interview would be beneficial. Also, to further enable proactive intervention, the implementation of an early alert and student tracking system, which would identify and monitor at-risk students on a timely basis, would be effective. Lastly, since a high proportion of leavers intend to return to their 'home' college, the colleges should create re-absorption strategies to discover what these students' need to return to PSE.

Introduction

Purpose of the Study

“Research has shown that slightly higher proportions of college students drop-out in Ontario (14.9%) versus the rest of Canada (13.3%) after the first year” (Finnie, Childs, & Qiu, 2010). The situation is exacerbated for students attending colleges in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), where graduation rates are lower than in other Ontario college regions (Zhao & McCloy, 2009). In the GTA, college graduation rates vary widely, from 54 to 73 per cent. A review of the literature reveals that little is known about the causes behind early departure and the pathways taken by Ontario college students who currently are not attending school and did not graduate, which this study defines as ‘early leavers.’

This study is a collaborative endeavour involving the Institutional Research (IR) offices of the six colleges in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) – Centennial College, Durham College, George Brown College, Humber College, Seneca College and Sheridan College. With funding provided by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), this study contributes to efforts directed at closing knowledge gaps in the area of institutional student attrition. Specifically, this project seeks to better understand the factors motivating college departure and to identify post-attrition pathways that college early leavers undertake. This information would enable the GTA colleges to design appropriate intervention strategies, both as individual colleges and as a collaborative network.

Our preliminary literature review identified related, but not identical, studies on college leavers. The 2008 Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) report ‘Reasons for Non-Completion of Post-secondary Education and Profile of Post-secondary Dropouts’ (Ma & Frempong, 2008) examined 18- to 20-year-old youths who took part in the first three cycles of the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) and attended college or university. The authors concluded that postsecondary dropouts tended to be male, have a low postsecondary education goal, have an experience of dropping out of high school, and have a GPA below 60 per cent, among other characteristics. Recommendations for improving persistence included adequate preparation at the secondary level for postsecondary studies, more friendly college environments that provide remedial support, and the provision of support groups, extracurricular activities and scholarships to boost morale and reward persistence.

The 2004 study by Statistics Canada and HRSDC entitled ‘Who Pursues Postsecondary Education, Who Leaves and Why: Results from the Youth in Transition Survey’ (Lambert, Zeman, Allen, & Bussière, 2004) also looked at the experiences of college and university students at the national level and was based on the first two cycles of the YITS survey. The report concluded that women were more likely to attend PSE and less likely to drop out, that levels of high school engagement positively correlated with postsecondary engagement, and that parental educational attainment and parents’ values positively correlated with participation and persistence. The major reason for dropping out was related to lack of program fit.

A number of other Canadian provincial-level studies were reviewed, including the 2007 ‘Survey of Early Leavers: Universities and Colleges in Manitoba,’ the 2006 ‘Alberta Post-secondary Early Leavers Study,’ which included both colleges and universities, and the 2000 ‘British Columbia Universities Early Leavers Survey.’ (PRA Associates, 2007; Government of Alberta, 2006; Conway, 2000). These reports indicated that students left postsecondary education for personal reasons or lack of program fit, although there were differences noted in the typology of early leavers.

While these studies were helpful in identifying salient variables and in constructing the survey tools, none were specific to the Ontario context – or more specifically the GTA context – and none involved only colleges.

This research project is therefore unique as it only involves public colleges located in the GTA and includes college leavers of any age.

Research Questions

This study addressed four primary research questions:

- *What did the early leavers feel were the factors that contributed to their departure?*
- *What pathways did the early leavers pursue after dropping out of college?*
- *Why did the high-achieving students leave, and what did they do after leaving college?*
- *Are there any sub-groups of leavers for whom remedies can be made available?*

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, the term ‘early leavers’ refers to students who were enrolled full-time in any Ontario college credentialed program in the fall semesters of 2007, 2008 or 2009, who did not graduate from their institutions, and who were not enrolled at their ‘home’ college at the time of the survey.

This study is the first attempt to understand differences between early leavers based on their academic achievement or cumulative grade point average (GPA) upon departure. The development of profiles or segments based on GPA is an innovation in the literature that is intended to enable policy makers, administrators, researchers and college staff to understand the complex reasons why students leave in spite of good academic achievement. Experts on persistence have suggested that there is no consensus in the literature about who drops out and why (Finnie, Childs, & Qui, 2010). However, with the shift from retention rates to retention ‘risk’ comes the understanding that the early leaver population includes representatives from all levels of student achievement. Managing student retention is therefore not as simple as ensuring that only the best students are offered admission.

Each college was asked to assign a grade range to three academic achievement categories – high, average and low (Table 1) – for its early leaver population. Generally, ‘high grades’ corresponded to honours-level performance, ‘low grades’ were associated with students being at risk for academic suspension, and ‘average grades’ corresponded to the remainder of the leavers. These three mutually exclusive groups were analyzed and compared in this report. Results for specific sub-groups of leavers are reported where appropriate, such as when making comparisons between those with and without prior postsecondary education.

Table 1. GPA-based Categories of Early Leavers

	George Brown	Humber	Seneca	Durham	Centennial	Sheridan
High grades (n=218)	3.30 - 4.00	80 - 100%	3.50 - 4.00	4.00 - 5.00	3.90 - 4.50	3.30 - 4.00
Average grades (n=793)	2.00 - 3.29	60 - 79%	2.00 - 3.49	2.00 - 3.99	2.00 - 3.89	2.00 - 3.29
Low grades (n=821)	0.00 - 1.99	0 - 59%	0.00 - 1.99	0.00 - 1.99	0.00 - 1.99	0.00 - 1.99

Note: Total samples = 1940. However, 108 students were included in the total sample but could not be included in the three academic achievement groups due to undefined GPAs.

A survey of early leavers was conducted by R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. on behalf of the six GTA colleges. All respondents were required to give their consent prior to participating in the study. For five of the colleges, informed consent was obtained verbally from individual respondents prior to the administration of a telephone survey. Upon request, respondents were also allowed to complete the survey on their own by accessing the online version of the survey. Two to 7 per cent of the total completed responses in five colleges

were collected using self-administered online surveys. The data collection for the sixth college proceeded differently. Respondents were sent individual direct email invitations to an online survey. The first page/screen of the survey asked for the student’s consent. Once the respondent had agreed to participate in the survey, he/she was able to proceed and complete the self-administered survey.

Students who were required to withdraw by the college at any time up to the date of data extraction were excluded in five of six participating colleges.¹ As reported by each college, the estimated percentage of academic/mandatory leavers ranged from 20 to 50 per cent.

The research was undertaken only after the approval of institutional ethics review boards. A telephone follow-up was conducted with non-responsive numbers and soft refusals. Tracking and tracing procedures were also utilized to locate former students whose contact details were unreliable or unavailable.

The survey was administered between March and December 2010 (Table 2). The 1940 completed responses represent a response rate of 18 per cent. Results are reliable within a sample margin of error no greater than + 2.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

Table 2. Sample Size and Survey Administration Dates

	College						Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	
Number of respondents	361	363	355	222	278	361	1940
Survey administration dates	Nov-Dec, 2010	Mar-April, 2010	May-Aug, 2010	Aug-Nov, 2010	Dec, 2010	April-May, 2010	March-Dec, 2010

Limitations of the Research

The current early leavers study follows a single sample design. The research methodology does not permit comparisons to a control group of non-leavers. Differences are therefore observed within the sample itself rather than in comparison with non-leaving college students. As such, it is difficult to ascertain how, why and whether the characteristics of early leavers differ from their non-leaving college counterparts.

Because the colleges received independent research ethics approval at different times, the survey was administered from March to December 2010. Seasonal differences in outcomes may have been introduced. For example, respondents were asked to describe their current employment status and to indicate whether they were currently taking any formal education. If they were taking the survey in May, their answers may well be different than if they took the survey in October. Lastly, the difference in the data collection approach for one college compared to the other five colleges as described in the previous section could possibly introduce a bias in the interpretation of the survey items (see section on Non-response Bias).

Non-response Bias

Non-response biases can affect the extent to which the research results are generalizable beyond the sample from which they were collected and are therefore important to recognize. The calculation of non-response bias was conducted by the individual colleges – i.e., by comparing the selected descriptors (gender, age,

¹ Mandatory withdrawal occurs when a college requires that a student leave due to issues pertaining to his/her behaviour, attendance or academic performance. One college was unable to determine which leavers were mandatory withdrawals.

GPA, cohort year) of their respective early leavers included in the study and early leavers who did not participate in the survey (Table 3).

Table 3. Response Bias

	Gender	Age	GPA	Cohort Year
Centennial	No	Yes	Yes	No
Durham	No	Yes	No	Yes
George Brown	No	No	No	No
Humber	No	Yes	No	No
Seneca	No	Yes	No	No
Sheridan	No	No	No	No

Note: 'Yes' entry indicates a significant response bias at that college on that variable.

No college had a response bias for gender (i.e., male leavers were as likely to participate as female leavers). One college had a response bias for GPA, and one college had a response bias for cohort year. Four of the six colleges had a different age profile for respondents and non-respondents.

Although some minimal differences among respondents and non-respondents were noted by the individual colleges, collectively, the results and findings of this study are projectable to the overall population of early leavers.

Characteristics and Demographics

The literature on postsecondary student persistence suggests that persistence is, in part, dependent upon students' incoming personal characteristics such as age, socio-economic status, and academic achievement prior to college enrollment (Conway, 2001). Students' demographic profile, their level of maturity, the firmness of their career path and their support network at home all contribute to their ability to persist in attaining their academic goals.

Table 4 shows the profile of the early leavers from the participating colleges, both overall and by college GPA. Although the study was not structured to compare leavers with the overall college population, some comparisons can be made using the Ontario Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Student Satisfaction survey (KPI-SSS).² Using the 2008-2009 KPI-SSS results for the six GTA colleges as a comparison, the leavers population was somewhat more likely to be male and under 21 years of age. However, both groups had a similar level of education completed prior to college entry. Comparisons on citizenship, Aboriginal status and parental education are not possible due to the unavailability of data.

When comparing various demographic factors by academic performance, high-performing students were more likely to be female, older, be landed immigrants, to have had at least one parent who attended PSE and to have previously attended PSE themselves. They were less likely to be Aboriginal or first-generation students. This group and the academically average leavers were both less likely to have discontinued before completing their first semester of study.

² This is a survey of all college students in Ontario, except those who are in their first semester of study.

Table 4. Demographics by GPA

	High	Average	Low	Total
	<i>Percentage</i>			
Gender				
1 = Male	40.4	49.6	55.5	50.9
2 = Female	59.6	50.4	44.6	49.1
Age				
1 = Less than 21	35.9	48.2	58.0	51.5
2 = 21-25	28.1	30.8	28.8	29.0
3 = 26-30	14.3	9.1	5.7	8.1
4 = 31-35	8.8	3.9	2.1	3.6
5 = Over 35	12.9	8.0	5.5	7.9
Status while enrolled				
1 = Canadian by birth	62.4	62.6	69.7	65.9
2 = Landed immigrant	16.1	10.7	8.4	10.3
3 = Canadian citizen born outside of Canada	18.8	24.0	18.8	21.2
4 = Refugee visa	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.1
6 = Student visa	1.8	2.2	2.1	2.0
8 = Other	0.9	0.5	0.7	0.6
If Aboriginal				
1 = Yes	0.9	2.2	3.7	2.7
2 = No	99.1	97.8	96.3	97.3
If either parent attended postsecondary education (PSE)				
1 = Yes	75.4	68.0	69.9	69.0
2 = No	24.7	32.0	30.2	31.0
Highest education completed upon college entry				
Less than high school	0.9	1.5	2.2	1.8
High school graduate	44.4	69.7	75.2	68.9
Some postsecondary education	14.4	11.4	10.8	11.1
Postsecondary certificate, diploma or trades qualification (apprenticeship)	10.2	8.2	5.1	7.3
Bachelor's degree	25.9	7.1	4.7	8.5
Certificate or diploma above bachelor's level (Post-graduate certificate)	1.4	0.6	0.4	0.6
Master's, Doctorate, Law, or Medicine	2.8	1.5	1.7	1.8
1st semester of study completion				

	High	Average	Low	Total
	<i>Percentage</i>			
Completed 1st semester of study	89.4	85.1	55.4	70.0
Did not complete 1st semester of study	10.6	14.9	44.6	30.0
Program area of study				
Applied Arts	37.6	35.7	32.4	34.2
Business	26.2	30.6	33.4	30.8
Health	16.1	15.4	12.9	15.2
Technology	20.2	18.3	21.3	19.8

Note: 108 respondents did not have grades in their files. However, the 'all leavers' column includes those respondents.

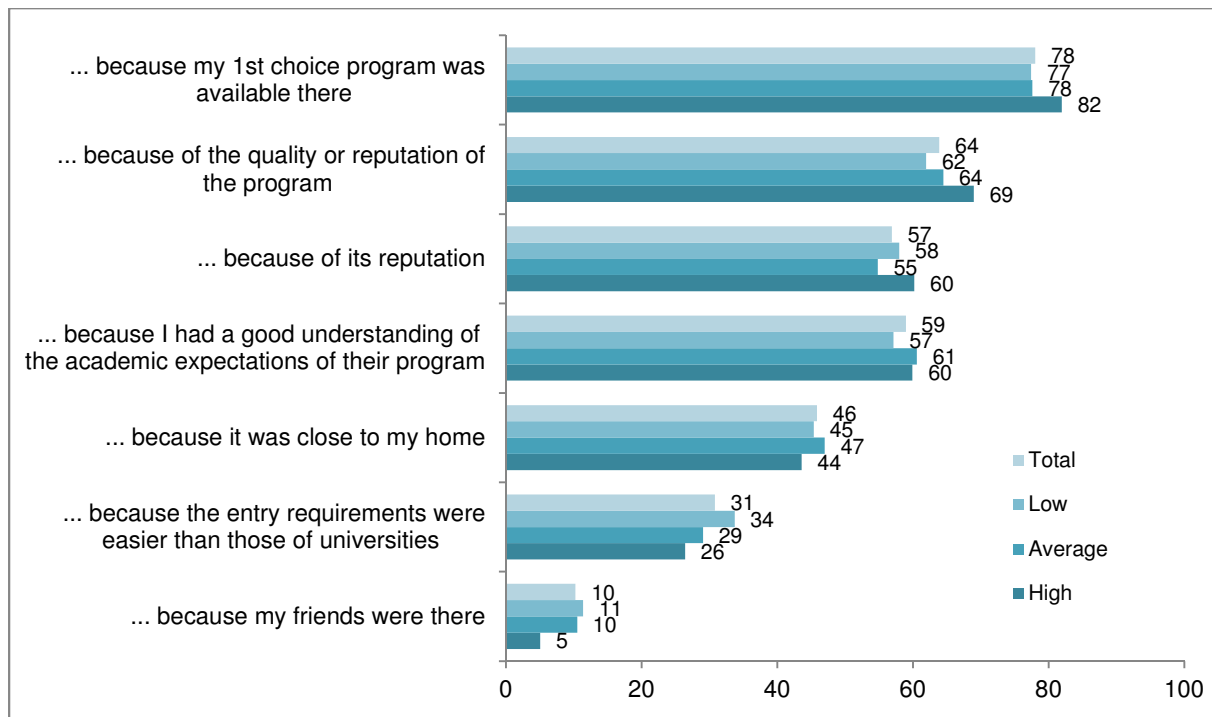
Factors behind College and Program Choice

One common notion about early leavers is that they are not enrolled in their first choice program or first choice institution. However, this study showed that 88 and 80 per cent respectively were registered in their first choice program and first choice institution; 72 per cent were enrolled in both their first choice institution and program.

Early leavers were read a list of reasons and were asked to indicate the extent to which each reason influenced their decision to attend their chosen college. Two reasons for attending generated the highest levels of agreement across all three academic groups: 'my first choice program was available there' (78%) and the 'quality or reputation of the program' (64%) (Figure 1).

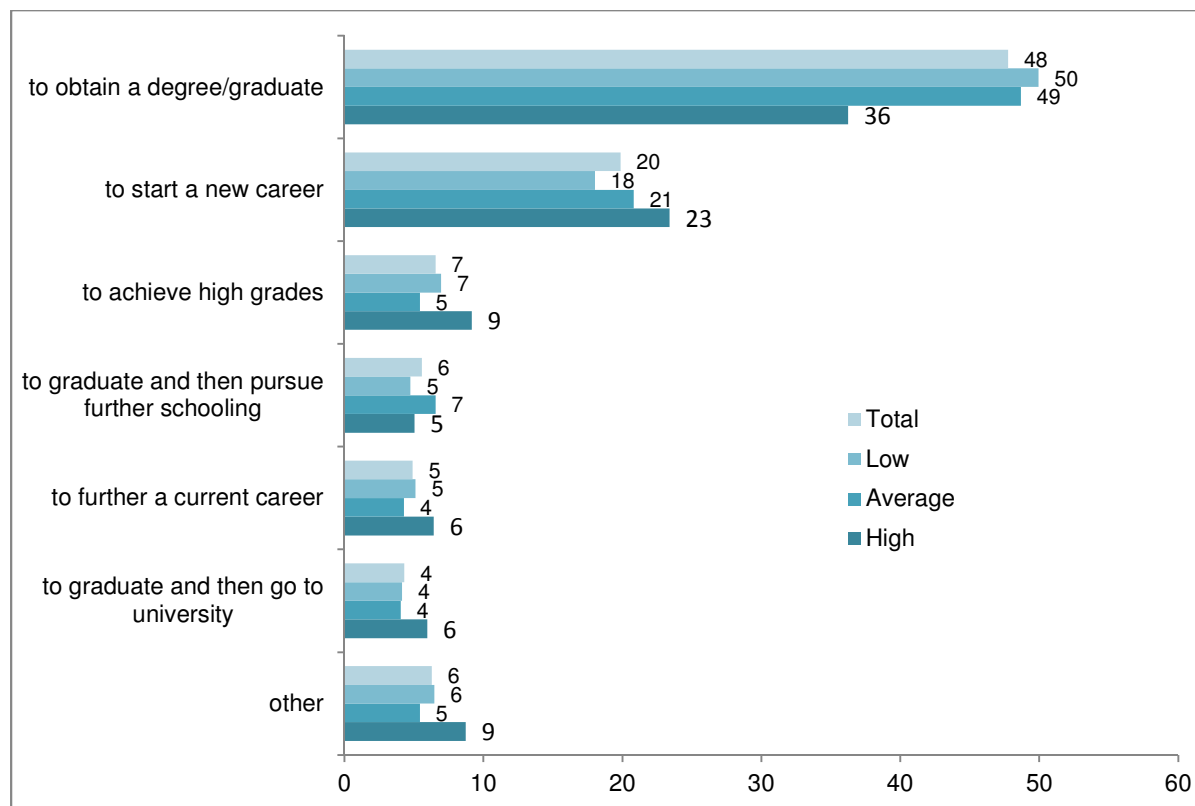
Although the ranked order of the remaining reasons for attending was similar across the three academic achievement groups, two differences were noted. A larger proportion of students with low grades 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that they attended their respective college 'because the entry-level requirements were easier than those of universities' (34% vs. 29% of students with average grades and 26% of students with high grades). A smaller proportion of students with high grades agreed or strongly agreed that 'because my friends were there' influenced their decision to attend (5% vs. 10% of students with average grades and 11% of students with low grades).

Figure 1. Reasons for Attending this College by GPA (% Agree and Strongly Agree)



In an open-ended question, respondents stated their primary goal when starting their program. These responses were coded and placed in categories (Figure 2). Interestingly, only about half of the students mentioned that their main goal was to obtain a credential or graduate from their program. Those with high GPAs were the least likely to mention this. However, an additional 10 per cent planned to graduate and then pursue further education. Career-related reasons, either to further a current career or start a new career, comprised a quarter of the total responses.

Figure 2. Primary Goal for Starting Program by GPA



Sources of Funds for Educational Expenses

Respondents were asked to identify the major and minor sources of funding for their educational expenses (Table 5).

The degree of dependence on each of the sources of funding was similar across the three academic achievement groups. The top three major sources of funding were personal savings (44%), parents/family (43%) and government student loans (36%). Scholarships/awards were not a major source of funding for any of the three groups. This is especially so for students with low grades – 22 per cent claimed that scholarships were a minor source of funding compared to 30 per cent of students with high grades.

Table 5. Sources of Funds for Educational Expenses (%)

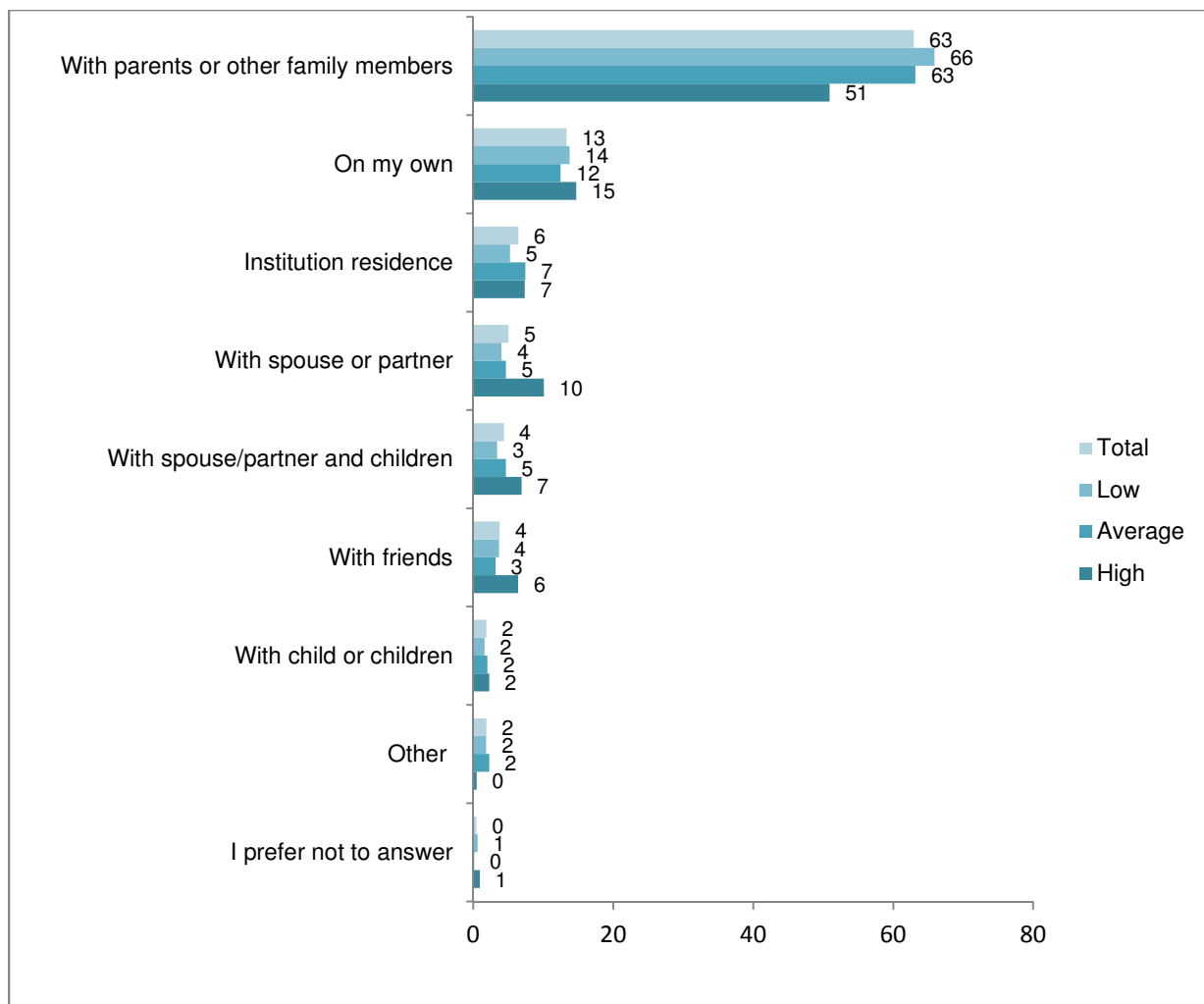
	High	Average	Low	All Leavers
<i>Percentage</i>				
Personal				
Major	50	43	43	44
Minor	29	36	34	34
Private Loans				
Major	10	7	9	8
Minor	17	18	18	18
Scholarships/Awards				
Major	5	6	5	5
Minor	30	29	22	26
Parents/Family				
Major	40	42	45	43
Minor	26	26	24	25
Government Student Loans				
Major	31	40	33	36
Minor	12	16	15	15
Other				
Major	4	3	2	3
Minor	2	3	2	2

Note: Refers to multiple responses; 'all leavers' column excludes those without grades.

Living Arrangement while Enrolled

When asked about their living arrangement during their time at college, 63 per cent indicated that they lived with parents or other family members (Figure 3). However, this proportion was smaller among students with high grades (51%) than students with average grades (63%) and low (66%) grades.

Figure 3. Living Arrangement While Enrolled by GPA (%)



In-school Experience

Most retention research frameworks and findings focus on the strong association of retention with students’ academic and social engagement. Students who become socially and academically integrated into the institutional community are more likely to persist (Tinto, 1993). The social connections they make in their first year of study are especially important (Thomas, 2000). Students’ peers have considerable influence on their decisions to persist. Astin (1993) asserts that “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). This study likewise understands the crucial role of students’ active engagement with teachers and peers, academically and socially.

Academic and Social Engagement

Leavers were asked about their level of engagement with on-campus academic and social activities (Table 6). The great majority had strong engagement levels, as demonstrated by how often they completed their homework on time or participated in classroom discussions. Specifically, 95 to 100 per cent of leavers indicated that they either 'sometimes,' 'often' or 'very often' participated in these activities. However, there was relatively weaker participation noted for other teacher-student engaging activities, such as discussion with teachers about grades or assignments, ideas, or career plans and ambitions.

Table 6. Academic and Social Engagement (%)

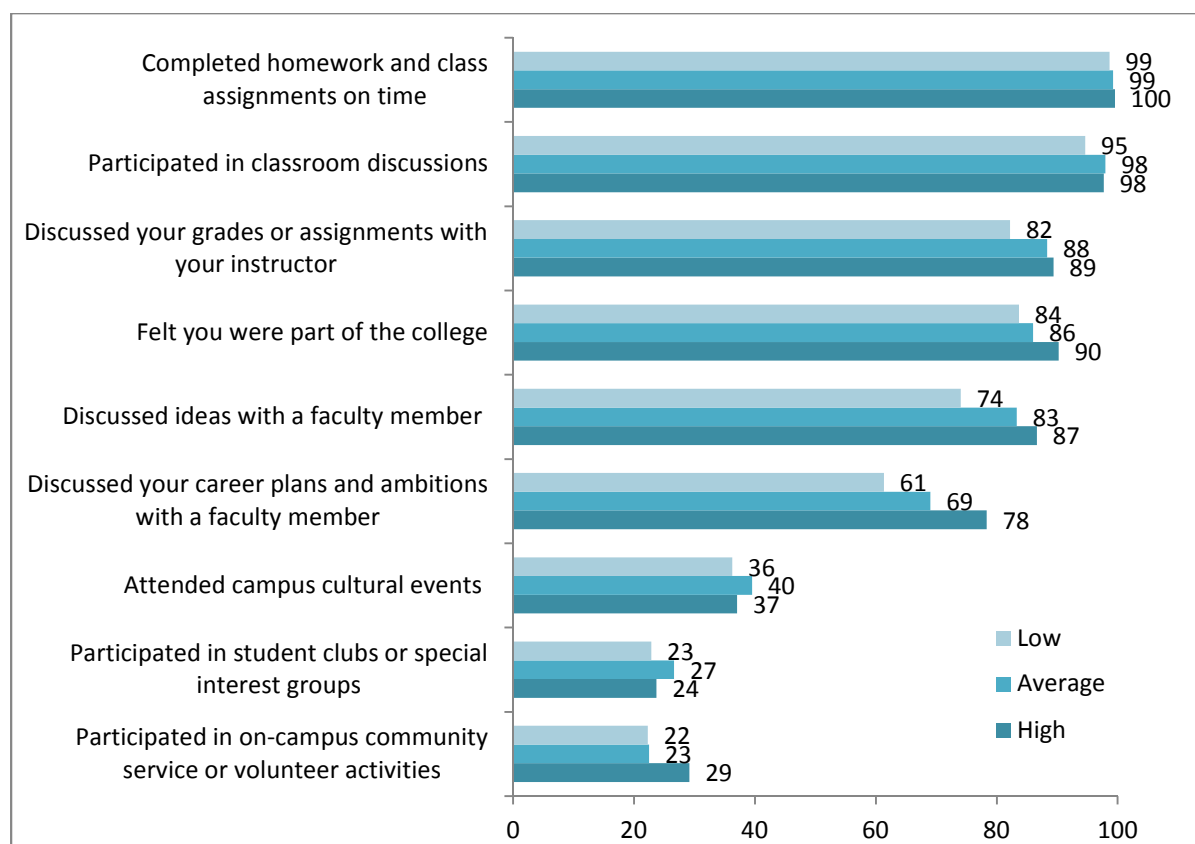
	Often/Very Often	Sometimes	Never
Completed homework and class assignments on time	85.2	13.3	1.5
Participated in classroom discussions	69.2	26.8	4.0
Felt you were part of the college	47.5	37.9	14.7
Discussed your grades or assignments with your instructor	45.7	39.3	15.0
Discussed ideas with a faculty member	40.0	38.8	21.2
Discussed your career plans and ambitions with a faculty member	28.5	37.8	33.7
Attended campus cultural events	11.2	26.8	62.1
Participated in student clubs or special interest groups	8.8	15.7	75.5
Participated in on-campus community service or volunteer activities	6.1	17.0	76.9

An analysis of student engagement by GPA was also conducted (Figure 4). A larger proportion of academically high-achieving students (78%) had discussed their career plans and ambitions with their instructors compared to students with average grades (69%) and low grades (61%).

More leavers with high (87%) and average GPAs (83%) discussed their ideas with their instructors or faculty members compared to academically low-performing leavers (73%).

When compared to students with high grades (29%), a smaller proportion of students with low grades (22%) and average grades (22%) participated in on-campus community service or volunteer activities.

Figure 4. Academic and Social Engagement by GPA (% Sometimes/Often/Very Often)



The project further examined if engagement depends on whether a leaver is enrolled in his/her first choice program. Results indicated that those who were enrolled in their first choice program tended to be more connected with faculty members. About 67 per cent of leavers said that they ‘sometimes,’ ‘often’ or ‘very often’ discussed their career plans and ambitions with a faculty member compared to 60 per cent of those not enrolled in their first choice program. A total of 80 per cent said the same when it comes to discussing ideas with a faculty member (regarding term papers, class projects, etc.) compared to 70 per cent of those not enrolled in their first choice program. By contrast, those not enrolled in their first choice program were more likely to say that they ‘never’ engaged in these types of discussions.

Use of College Facilities and Resources

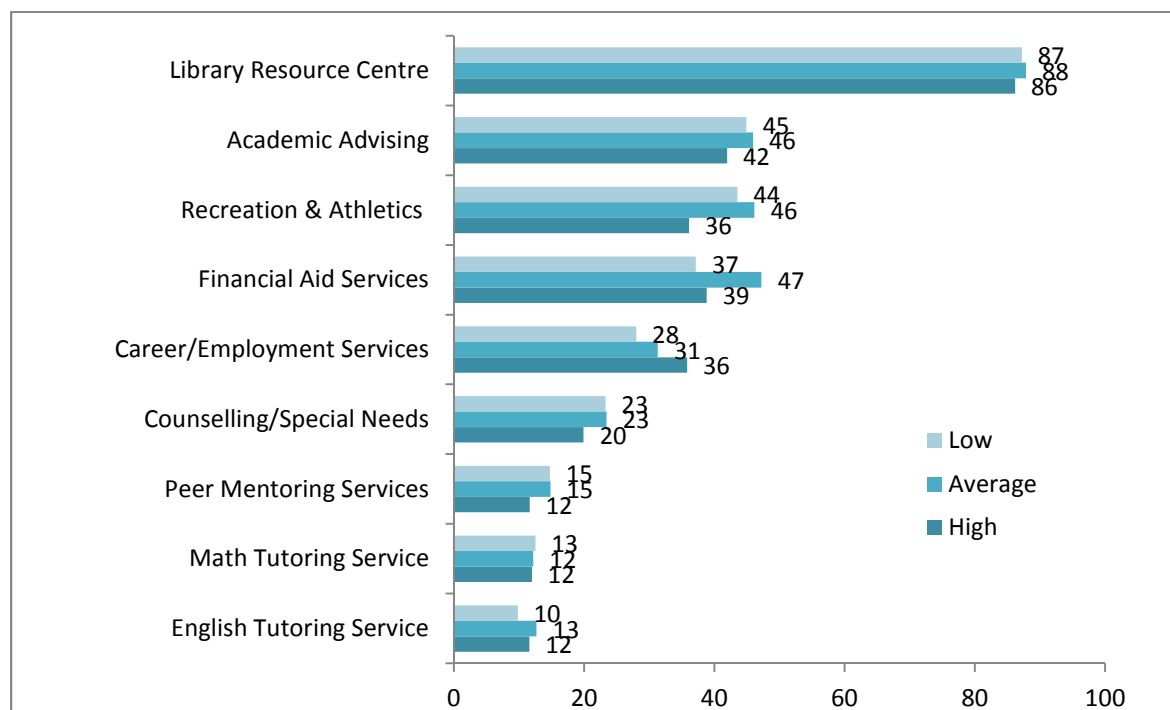
Leavers’ use of college facilities and resources was examined to understand their college experience (Table 7). Among all nine facilities and resources listed, only the Library Resource Centre was extensively used by most leavers (54%). Only about one in five indicated having ‘often’ or ‘very often’ used the Recreation & Athletics or Financial Aid Services at his/her college and only one in ten indicated extensive use of Academic Advising Services. The rest of the resources across the colleges, such as Counselling and Special Needs Services, Career/ Employment Services, English and Math Tutoring Services and Peer Mentoring Services were hardly used by the great majority of leavers.

Table 7. Use of College Facilities and Resources (%)

	Often & Very Often	Sometimes	Never
Library Resource Centre	54.2	32.1	13.7
Recreation & Athletics	21.5	22.2	56.3
Financial Aid Services	19.2	21.7	59.1
Academic Advising	11.9	33.0	55.1
Counselling/Special Needs	8.3	14.4	77.3
Career/Employment Services	7.3	22.4	70.3
English Tutoring Services	3.7	7.2	89.1
Math Tutoring Services	4.0	8.1	88.0
Peer Mentoring Services	3.2	11.1	85.7

There were small differences between students by academic standing when it came to the use of most college facilities (Figure 5). Students with high grades were less likely to use the Recreation & Athletics facilities (36%) compared to students with average grades (46%) and students with low grades (44%). More students with average grades (47%) use Financial Aid Services compared to academically low-performing leavers (37%).

Figure 5. College Facility Usage by GPA (% Sometimes/Often/Very Often)

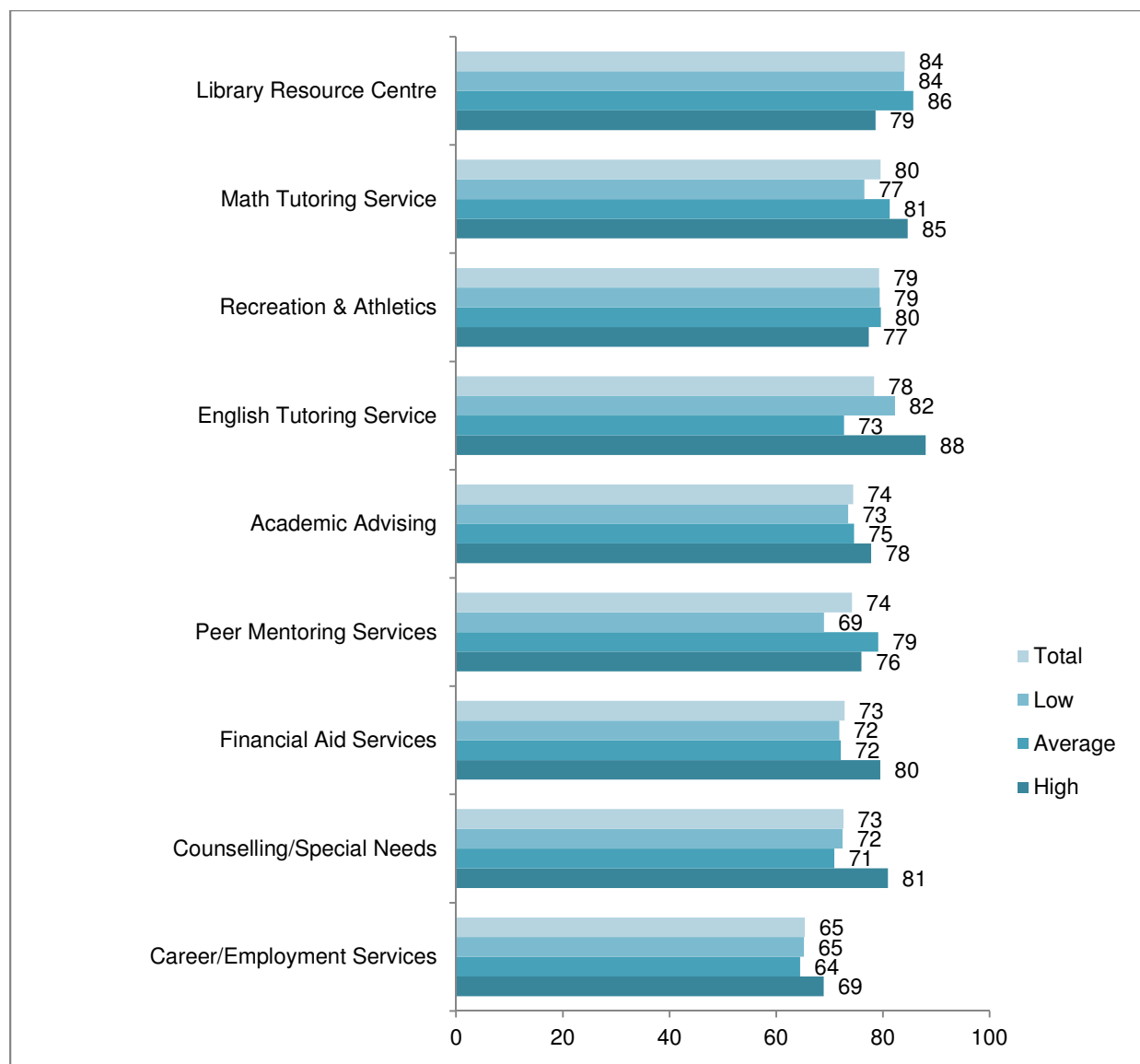


Satisfaction with College Facilities

Notwithstanding the extent of use of college facilities and resources, 64 to 84 per cent of leavers indicated being either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their experience in using these resources (Figure 6). This was likewise reflected in leavers' satisfaction with their overall college experience (see next section).

By academic achievement, the satisfaction levels with the Library Resource Centre were higher among students with average grades (86%) compared to academically high-performing students (79%). The latter also had considerably higher levels of satisfaction with Math Tutoring Services, English Tutoring Services, Financial Aid Services and Counselling and Special Needs Services compared to the other groups.

Figure 6. Satisfaction with College Facilities by GPA (% Satisfied & Very Satisfied)



College Assistance or Resources that Could Have Helped

In an open-ended question, early leavers expressed what their respective college could have done to help them complete their program. The resulting responses were processed into seven categories (Table 8).

Table 8. College Support that Could Have Been Provided

	n	%
1-Utilization/Availability of college services	269	29.0
2-Academic support	247	26.6
3-Nothing/Own decision to leave	80	8.6
4-Financial	105	11.3
5-Better communication	71	7.6
6-Connection with co-students and faculty	39	4.2
7-Other	118	12.7
Total Responses	929	100.0
	[47.9%]	
Don't know/No answer	1011	
	[52.1%]	
	n=1940	

Worth noting was that nearly half (52.1%) of the respondents indicated no input or feedback as to how they could have been helped better by their college. Because of this considerably high non-response rate, we further examined two specific aspects for this group of leavers: (1) satisfaction with departure decision, and (2) intention to resume studies at their home college. Does it matter to leavers what the college could have done if they were, after all, satisfied with their departure decision or not planning to return to their college? Results indicate that regardless of their satisfaction with their decision to leave or intention to re-enroll, leavers opted not to provide feedback as to how their college could have intervened for them to earn their credential.

Students with high grades were more likely to say that they wanted improved utilization/availability of college services compared to the other groups. Students with low grades were more likely than the other groups to say that they wanted more academic support. Students with low or average grades were more likely to state that financial services and assistance could have helped them complete their program.

Given that the utilization/availability of college resources topped the list, we 'mined' the responses further and generated four specific sub-categories under this main category (Table 8-1). This detailed tabulation was intended to support the expected interest of the colleges in designing further support services.

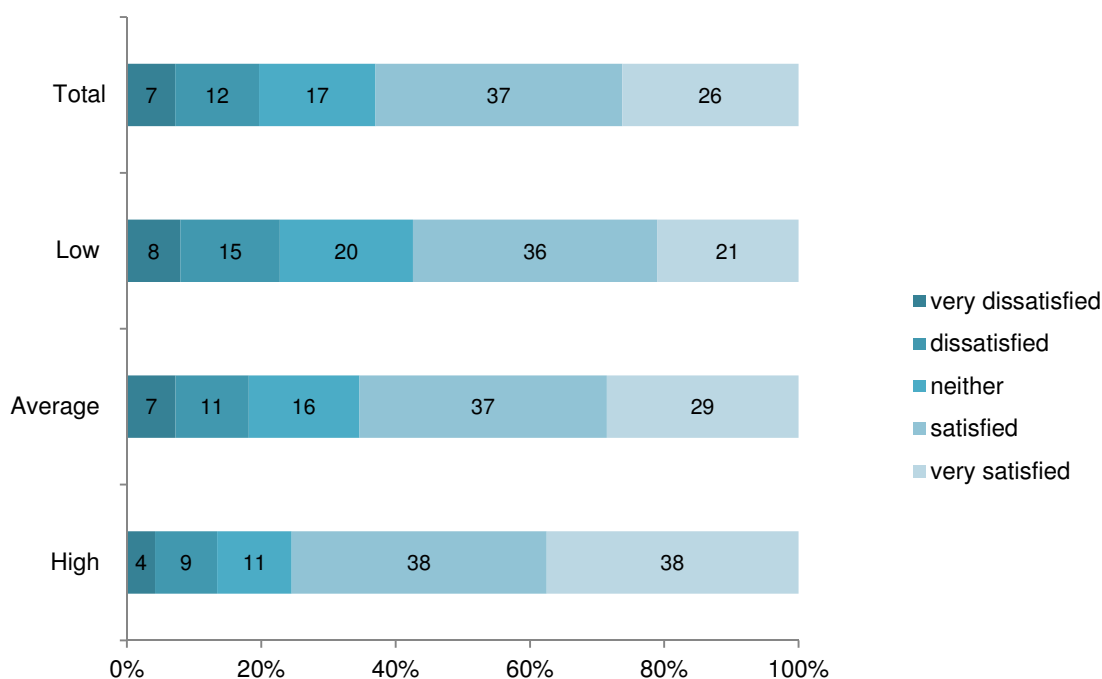
Table 8-1. College Support: Utilization/Availability of College Services (%)

	%
Address concerns about program content, requirements and delivery	47.0
Improved or additional college resources and facilities	32.0
Address issues with professors	11.0
Availability of (new) program of choice	10.0
	n=269

Overall Satisfaction with College Experience

Probing leavers' satisfaction with their overall educational experience revealed that 63.7 per cent indicated being 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' (Figure 7). A higher proportion of students with high grades (76%) reported being 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' than students with average grades (66%) and low grades (57%).

Figure 7. Satisfaction with College Experience by GPA



Employment Status while Enrolled

Excluding co-op placements, more than half (56.0%) of leavers were employed in either on- or off-campus jobs while studying, with almost one-third working more than 24 hours per week (Table 9).

Students with high grades were less likely to be working, and of those who were working, were more likely to work fewer hours. Fifty per cent of students with high grades were working during their time at college compared to 64 percent of students with average grades and 60 percent of those with low grades. Students with high grades worked an average of 19 hours each week during their time at college. This is less than students with low grades (21.9 hours) and students with average grades (20.2 hours).

Table 9. Employment Status While Enrolled (%)

	%
Working while studying	
Yes	56.0
No/Don't remember	44.0
Hours worked per week	
1 to 12	19.5
13 to 24	48.1
25 to 35	23.9
More than 35	8.5

Decision to Leave

Factors that Influenced Decisions to Leave

In order to understand early leavers' decision-making process, participants were asked how much certain factors influenced their decision to leave. They were also asked to identify their primary reason for leaving in an open-ended question, as well as whether they sought advice before leaving. A picture emerges that students who leave face a multitude of factors that influence their departure decisions.

Across all three academic achievement groups, the highest ranked factor was 'career goals changed' (Table 10). Forty-six per cent indicated that it was 'somewhat' or 'very much' an influencer for leaving.

Among students with high grades, changes in career goals (40%) and intentions to transfer to another postsecondary institution (33%) had the greatest influence on decisions to leave.

Among students with low and average grades, the second highest ranked factor influencing decisions to leave was not liking the program they were in. Note that the proportion mentioning this as a reason for leaving was greater among students with low grades (48%) than among academically average (37%) and high-performing (25%) students.

Among those with low grades, the third highest ranked reason for leaving was 'my marks were too low.' As expected, students with low grades were more likely (39%) than those with average grades (19%) or high grades (4%) to mention this as a factor for leaving.

A larger proportion of students with low (35%) and average grades (34%) left for personal or family reasons compared to students with high grades (27%).

Students with average (32%) and low grades (32%) were more likely than students with high grades (20%) to say that the high costs of attending school influenced their decision to leave.

Students with low grades were also more likely to feel disconnected from the college, to want a break from school and to feel uncertain about postsecondary education than students with high and average grades.

Table 10. Factors Influencing Decision to Leave

	High	Average	Low	Total
	% 'Very Much' & 'Somewhat' Influenced			
Career goals changed	40	42	52	46
Didn't like the program I was in	25	37	48	41
Personal/family issues	27	34	35	33
The costs of attending school were too high	20	32	32	31
I had problems with time management	13	24	34	27
Felt disconnected from the college	19	23	31	26
My marks were too low	4	19	39	26
Transferred to another postsecondary institution	33	25	22	25
I wanted a break from school	15	20	26	22
Felt uncertain about postsecondary education	13	18	26	21

High (n=218); Average (n=793); Low (n=821)

Primary Reason for Leaving

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to state their primary reason for leaving their 'home' college. The responses were clustered into 11 categories (Table 11). Overall, 'family/personal/health' reasons were the most cited, followed by financial reasons. When compared to the results shown in Table 10, both analyses demonstrate that career and program fit are key influencers, as well as personal/ family and financial issues. When comparing across achievement levels, those with high grades showed a distinct pattern, similar to that seen with the overall influencing factors for leaving. About 16 per cent of students with high grades left their respective college to attend university compared to 6 per cent for academically average and 3 per cent for academically low students. Among students with high grades, employment (20%) was also more likely to be cited as a reason for leaving than among students with average (9%) and low grades (7%). A higher proportion of students with low grades (14%) and average grades (14%) left for financial reasons compared to students with high grades (6%). About 13 per cent of students with low grades reported 'lost interest/dissatisfaction with the program' as a primary reason for leaving. This proportion is higher than academically average (9%) and high-performing students (4%).

Table 11. Primary Reason Behind Departure Decision by GPA (%)

	High	Average	Low	Total
Family/personal/health	17.3	18.2	16.5	17.2
Financial	6.1	13.5	14.5	12.8
Change in academic interest and plans	13	11	12	11.5
Lost interest/dissatisfaction with the program	4.2	9.0	12.8	10.6
Employment	19.6	8.8	6.6	8.9
Academic issue	5.1	7.9	9.9	8.5
Program specifications/fit	7.5	7.3	8.6	8.1
Faculty/instructor	3.3	7.1	6.5	6.1
Moved to university	15.9	6.1	2.9	5.8
Location	2.8	4.4	4.2	4.1
Other	3.7	4.3	3.1	4.1

Notes: (1) Displayed total is not equal to 100 per cent due to 'campus atmosphere' (1.2%) and 'take time off' (1.1%).

(2) Results presented as a percentage of students who answered the question, excluding 'don't know' and 'no response.'

The following section provides some examples of verbatim responses for the most frequently cited reasons:

Family/personal/health

When early leavers were asked why they left, the most frequent mention was related to family/personal/health reasons. However, it becomes clear that although this is the primary mention, coping with these issues may require flexibility or support from the institution, as well as financial support from some source.

Female (26-30 years old)

I had a child and there were some medical issues. I had to be with him full-time and I could not afford to place him in daycare.

Male (21-25 years old)

Basically I was younger and I felt things didn't happen quickly enough. Success wasn't coming as fast as I would want to.

Female (over 35 years)

Personal reasons. Nothing to do with the college. Complications at home and could not continue. The college helped a lot but I could not do it. I had too many personal obligations.

Financial Reasons

Responses related to finances often revolved around either complications with the financial aid process or the struggles for those trying to do without financial aid.

Male (less than 21 years old)

My main reason was probably money. I needed to work. I thought it would be a good idea to withdraw, work a bit and then come back to school.

Female (21-25 years old)

To save up money so I can pay for my own education without the assistance of OSAP.

Male (21-25 years old)

Financing the education. I was working full-time and studying full-time. I did not want to take OSAP and at that point if it was one of two. I have one more semester to complete to finish the program.

Change in Academic Interests and Plans

Many students realized that their program was not the right fit for them. Leavers did not seem to view this as a negative, since attempting the program helped them discover what they really wanted to be doing.

Male (less than 21 years old)

I changed my mind. I am more of an arts and music person. I decided that welding and drafting classes are not for me. I now work as a sheet metal worker.

Female (21-25 years old)

Although the program itself was excellent after a semester I realized it was not what I wanted to be doing, and it was far too expensive to complete without sufficient interest or motivation.

Male (less than 21 years old)

I just decided that the course wasn't for me. I decided to be a full-time writer.

Academic Issues

Issues related to academics were also cited frequently, with leavers acknowledging that they were not academically prepared for their program. It is interesting that respondents seem to accept personal responsibility for this and do not contemplate whether college resources could have helped them.

Male (over 35 years old)

The main reason I left early was because I was not academically prepared. I was not prepared in the way that I could keep not up with the workload due to my absence from school for a few years. I was basically trying to relearn how to adapt to doing school.

Female (less than 21 years old)

Well I wasn't doing well, and wasn't being able to attend classes and get my marks, my marks were low and couldn't get the work done. I was taking too many courses at one time and heavy schedule. Didn't use the help I could have used.

Female (less than 21 years old)

The only course I didn't pass was English. I have tried twice. In my mind, I already graduated. I just felt it was sick to put too many marks on an individual paper, (we didn't pay a lot of attention to the grammar at high school, the transition is hard).

Employment

Overall, 9 per cent of respondents mentioned that they left for employment. In some cases it was for a desired job, and students no longer felt they needed to complete their program. Generally, respondents seemed to consider it to be a positive outcome.

Female (over 35 years old)

I was selected for a job with Service Canada after competitive exams and interviews and relocated to another province to join my job. Thanks.

Male (31-35 years old)

I got the full-time job and I am not able to continue study during the week. Also, there is no part-time or weekend placement for me to complete the program.

Male (less than 21 years old)

I finished all but a few required courses of my program. I got a job in my respective field and kept working rather than finishing my program.

Faculty/instruction

Many respondents specifically mentioned issues related to faculty and/or the instruction they received.

Female (over 35 years old)

*My main reason for leaving *** College... During my study period at *** I was not getting a lot of support from my profs from the core subjects that I needed extra help with.*

Male (21-25 years old)

I was unhappy with the teaching method of one of the instructors. The course materials were not explained very well by the instructor.

Female (over 35 years old)

Disliked the professors, felt the course material was inappropriate, felt I wasn't learning anything, and was wasting money because the education was costly, as well.

Lost Interest in or Dissatisfaction with the Program

The theme of losing interest in or dissatisfaction with the program arose. Although somewhat overlapping with 'change in academic interests and plans,' this group expressed dissatisfaction with the program rather than just seeing it as a poor fit for them personally.

Male (less than 21 years old)

I wasn't enjoying the program, I thought it was different than it actually was.

Female (less than 21 years old))

I did not like the program I was taking anymore, I felt it wasn't what I wanted to do as my career.

Male (21-25 years old)

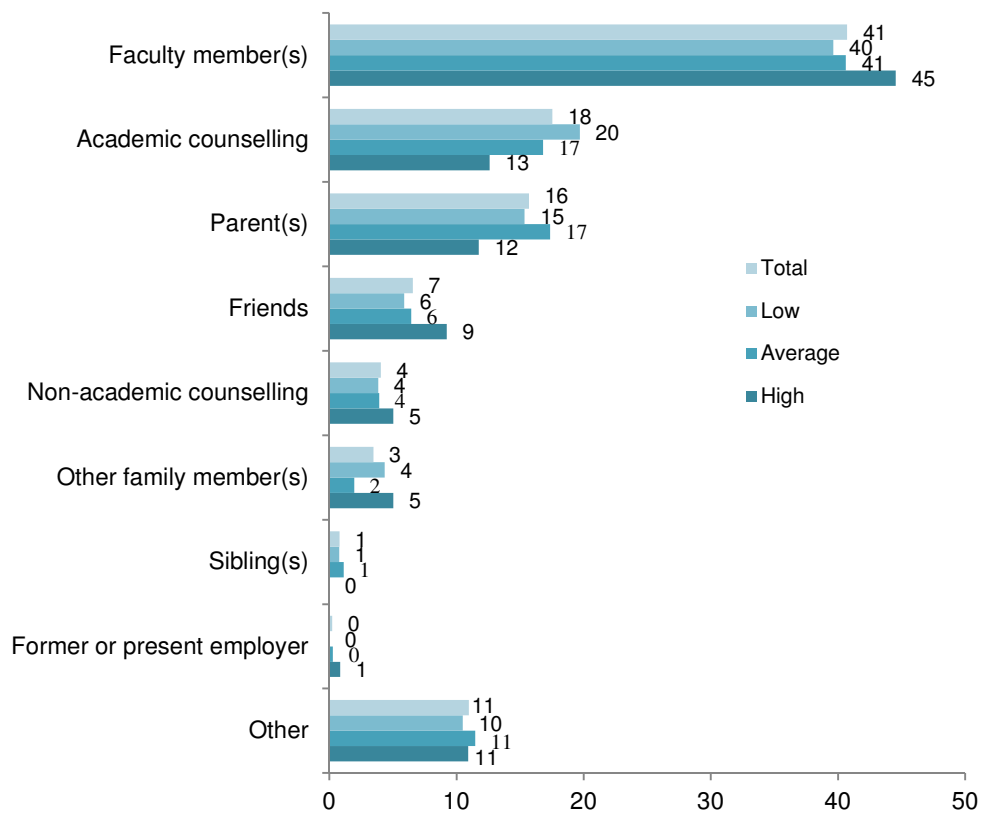
After first semester wasn't doing that well and I didn't want to be in the program I was in anymore, lost interest.

Seeking Advice Prior to Leaving

Slightly less than half of leavers sought advice prior to leaving (48%). A higher rate of students with high grades (56%) did so compared to academically average (46%) and low-performing students (48%).

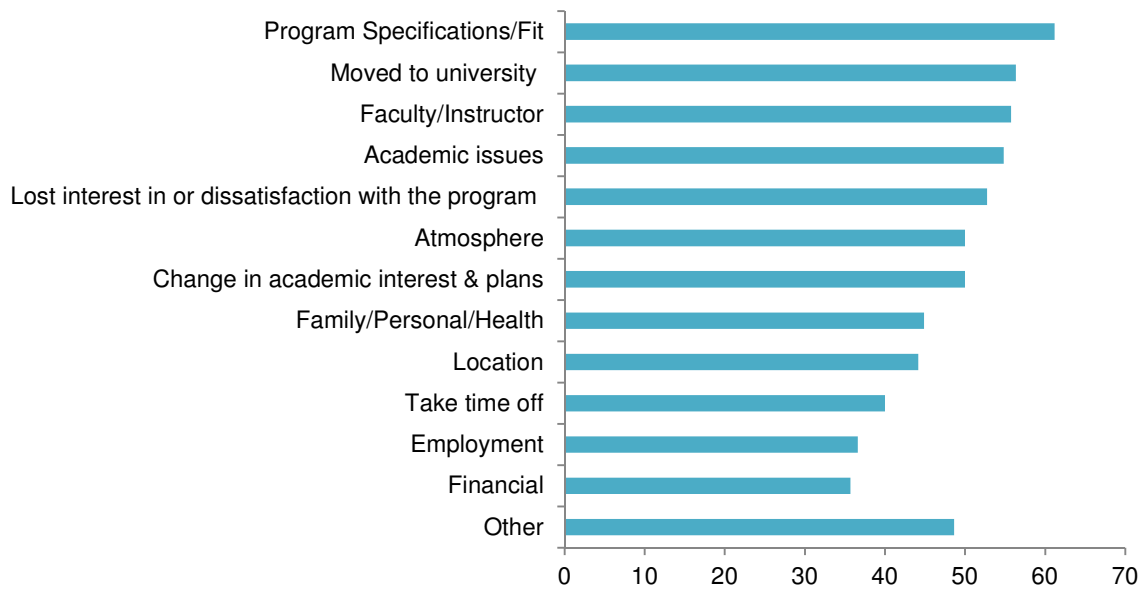
Overall, faculty members were most likely to be consulted (41%), followed by academic counsellors (18%) (Figure 8). There were slight differences across groups based on academic achievement. Students with high grades were more likely to consult with faculty members and less likely to do so with academic counsellors or their parents compared to the other groups.

Figure 8. Sources of Advice Prior to Leaving by GPA (%)



Furthermore, we examined the differences in the decision to seek pre-departure advice in relation to the reason for leaving (Figure 9). Students whose primary reason for leaving was related to program specification/fit, moving on to university or faculty or academic issues were most likely to seek advice. On the other hand, those who left for employment or as a result of financial issues were the least likely to have sought advice.

Figure 9. Percentage Who Sought Advice by Primary Reason for Leaving (%)



We expected that who students approach for advice would be related to their primary reason for leaving, and some interesting patterns emerged (Table 12). For example, students who left due to faculty/instructor issues or an academic issue were more likely to seek advice from a faculty member and less likely to have approached their parents for advice. This finding provides some support for the potential benefit of early alert strategies involving faculty to identify students at risk of departure. It is also interesting that non-academic counselling was used less than expected by those with financial, personal, or health issues, since that would be the area that may be able to help.

Table 12. Source of Advice by Primary Reason for Leaving (%)

	Faculty member(s)	Academic counselling	Non-academic counselling	Parents/siblings/other family members	Former or present employer	Friends	Other	TOTAL
Change in academic interest and plans	32.4	18.5	2.8	30.6	0.0	8.3	7.4	100.0
Academic issues	54.1	12.9	3.5	8.2	0.0	8.2	12.9	100.0
Family/personal/health	37.9	20.0	6.9	17.2	0.0	3.5	14.5	100.0
Employment	50.0	5.0	3.3	23.3	1.7	6.7	10.0	100.0
Financial	40.7	19.8	5.8	20.9	0.0	3.5	9.3	100.0
Program specifications/fit	39.8	22.6	3.2	19.4	0.0	5.4	9.7	100.0
Location	29.4	20.6	5.9	23.5	0.0	5.9	14.7	100.0
Atmosphere	54.6	36.4	0.0	9.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
Faculty/instructor	47.6	15.9	0.0	11.1	1.6	7.9	15.9	100.0
Take time off	62.5	0.0	12.5	12.5	0.0	0.0	12.5	100.0
Lost interest in or dissatisfaction with program	31.1	23.6	2.8	31.1	0.0	5.7	5.7	100.0
Moved to university	37.1	17.7	3.2	16.1	0.0	14.5	11.3	100.0
Other	60.0	11.4	5.7	8.6	0.0	0.0	14.3	100.0
Total	40.7	17.9	3.9	19.9	0.2	6.6	10.7	100.0

Early Leavers with Previous PSE

As shown in the demographics section of this report, a significant proportion of early leavers (30%) had already attended or completed some form of postsecondary education. The experience of early leavers who had previously attended some form of PSE is of interest, since many of their issues would likely be different than others, particularly around issues of transition and adapting to the culture of PSE institutions. Therefore, a comparison between those with previous PSE and those without was performed.

Demographics. As would be expected, the demographics of those with PSE were very different than those without. These characteristics need to be kept in mind when interpreting the findings, since some results may be related to these characteristics rather than just the impact of having previous PSE.

Compared to those without prior PSE experience upon entry in their respective college, those with prior PSE:

- were older (14% are less than 21 years of age vs. 67%)
- were less likely to live with their parents (42% vs. 72%)
- were less likely to rely on their parents as a major source of funds to meet educational expenses (31% vs. 48%)
- were more likely to be married (26% vs. 5%)
- worked more hours while they were attending their respective college (22.3 hours per week on average vs. 20.6 hours)

- were less likely to be Canadian by birth (54% vs. 71%)
- were more likely to be landed immigrants (17% vs. 7%) or here as international students (4% vs. 1%)
- were less likely to report being a person of Aboriginal descent (1% vs. 3%)
- were less likely to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that they attended their respective college because the entry-level requirements were easier (24% vs. 34%)

Academic and Social Engagement. Those with prior PSE displayed a higher level of academic engagement and faculty interaction than those without prior PSE (Table 13). Specifically, they were more likely to indicate that they ‘often’ or ‘very often’:

- completed homework on time (91% vs. 83%)
- participated in class discussions (76% vs. 66%)
- discussed grades, career plans and ideas with a faculty member or instructor (35-50% vs. 26-44%)

However, there was little indication that students with previous PSE differed from those without in terms of engagement with college activities or services. They were somewhat less likely to indicate that they ‘often’ or ‘very often’:

- attended campus cultural events (8% vs. 12%)
- felt they were part of the college (45% vs. 49%)

Table 13. Academic and Social Engagement

	Without PSE	With PSE	All Leavers
	% ‘Often’ & ‘Very Often’		
Completed homework and class assignments on time	83.1	90.9	85.3
Participated in classroom discussions	66.3	76.3	69.2
Felt you were part of the college	48.8	44.6	47.6
Discussed your grades or assignments with your instructor	44.0	50.1	45.8
Discussed ideas with a faculty member (e.g., term paper, class project, etc.)	36.6	48.5	40.0
Discussed your career plans and ambitions with a faculty member	25.9	34.8	28.5
Attended campus cultural events (e.g., theatre, concerts, art exhibits)	12.4	8.2	11.2
Participated in student clubs or special interest groups	8.5	9.7	8.9
Participated in on-campus community service or volunteer activities	6.5	5.2	6.1

Use of College Resources. With respect to their use of the available college facilities and resources, those with prior PSE were more likely to use Career and Employment Services (34% vs. 28%) and English Tutoring Services (13% vs. 10%) (Table 14). Interestingly, they were less likely to use the Recreation and Athletics facilities (34% vs. 48%).

Table 14. Use of College Resources: With and Without Postsecondary Education

	Without PSE	With PSE	All Leavers
	% Sometimes/often/very often		
Library Resource Centre	86.9	84.9	86.3
Academic Advising	44.9	44.9	44.9
Recreation & Athletics	47.7	34.2	43.8
Financial Aid Services	39.7	43.4	40.8
Career/Employment Services	28.1	33.8	29.7
Counselling/Special Needs	22.1	23.9	22.6
Peer Mentoring Services	13.7	15.9	14.3
Math Tutoring Service	12.3	11.1	11.9
English Tutoring Service	9.8	13.4	10.8

Factors behind Departure. In terms of why they left, students with previous PSE, for the most part, were less likely to state that each of the reasons provided either ‘somewhat’ or ‘very much’ impacted their decision to leave (Table 15). However, factors related to personal and family issues, cost of attending and a feeling of disconnection from the college were similar whether the leaver had previous PSE or not. Overall, these results indicate that those with previous PSE appear not to have issues with career clarity or academics, but do experience similar personal and engagement issues compared to those without PSE.

Table 15. Factors that Influenced Departure Decision: With and Without Previous Postsecondary Education

	Without PSE	With PSE	All Leavers
	% ‘Somewhat’ and ‘Very Much’ Influenced		
Career goals changed	51	36	47
Didn’t like the program I was in	46	29	41
Personal/family issues	34	32	33
The costs of attending school were too high	30	31	31
I had problems with time management	30	21	27
Felt disconnected from the college	27	25	26
My marks were too low	30	16	26
Transferred to another postsecondary institution	26	21	25
I wanted a break from school	24	17	22
Felt uncertain about postsecondary education	24	13	21

Post-departure Outcomes

Two time periods were referenced in capturing a snapshot of post-departure outcomes. The first was the immediate outcome, or the status of leavers within three months after leaving their college, and the second was the current outcome, or the status at the time the survey was conducted.

Finnie and Qiu found that “by one year after first having left school, 22.3% of college leavers and 35.6% of university leavers have returned. By three years later... the returns stand at 40.3% and 54.0%, respectively, for college and university leavers. These are substantial numbers” (2008, p. 193). One of the limitations of this study was the inability to examine whether the current post-departure outcome pertains to a given span of time from when the leavers discontinued their studies. Because this was not a longitudinal study, the snapshot outcome could not be interpreted to be, say, a year or two years after they left their ‘home’ college. This study did not examine any possible pathways that the leavers could have followed between leaving their college and the time the survey was conducted.

Based on the pathway that they followed in either the immediate or current time period, leavers were characterized as dropouts, switchers, persisters, completers and lifelong learners.

Immediate Outcome

Three months after leaving college, 90 per cent of leavers had not resumed their studies and could be considered dropouts (Table 16). However, 9.2 per cent were characterized as switchers, as they left their ‘home’ college to transfer to another institution.

The strong pull of employment determined the immediate status for the majority of dropouts. Specifically, 60.2 per cent were engaged in either full- or part-time employment immediately after discontinuing their studies; 10.4 per cent cited attending to personal matters such as illness, caring for family members, travelling or doing nothing; 10.2 per cent were looking for work; and 9.2 per cent cited situations other than the above categories.

Table 16. Immediate Post-departure Outcome (%)

DROPOUTS	90.0
Working full-time	45.6
Working part-time	14.6
Looking for work	10.2
Travelling	1.6
Caring for children/parents/family member(s)	2.7
Illness	3.1
Nothing	3.0
Other	9.2
SWITCHERS (Going to another school)	9.2
	n=1940
	100.0%

Note: Displayed total is not equal to 100 due to ‘don’t know,’ ‘prefer not to answer’ or missing values.

Current Outcome

At the time the survey was conducted, 29.5 per cent of leavers were either attending school and not working or attending school and working at the same time (Table 17). It should be emphasized that attending school means currently studying at an institution that is not their 'home' college. The remainder were not enrolled in any PSE; specifically, 53.5 per cent indicated that they were working but not studying, while 17 per cent were neither employed nor studying. This scenario does not imply, though, that leavers who were not enrolled at the time of the survey were still dropouts, as the later section shows.

Table 17. Current Post-departure Outcome (%)

Enrolled (not working)	194
	10.2%
Enrolled and working	367
	19.3%
Employed (not enrolled)	1,014
	53.5%
Neither working nor enrolled	322
	17.0%
	n= 1,897
	100.00%

Note: As a percentage of students who answered the question, excluding 'don't know' and 'no response.'

We combined the highest level of education completed upon college entry and the current highest education earned to identify leavers who are still dropouts and the ones who have already completed PSE (Table 18). Twelve per cent of leavers subsequently earned a PSE credential after their initial dropout. However, a considerable 70.1 per cent have not earned their postsecondary credential to date. Interestingly, 18 per cent had entered college with a previous PSE credential (college or university).

Table 18. Highest Education Completed

Not completed PSE	1332
	70.1%
Completed PSE after initial drop-out	224
	11.8%
Entered college with PSE credential*	345
	18.1%
	n=1901
	100.0%

*This group also may or may not have obtained an additional PSE credential after initial drop-out.

Note: As a percentage of students who answered the question, excluding 'don't know' and 'no response.'

For an in-depth look, we compared the highest education status with the current outcome. This resulted in the classification of stopouts, dropouts, lifelong learners, employed (with PSE) and unemployed (with PSE) (Table 19).

Table 19. Leaver Types based on Highest Education Completed vs. Current Outcome

Highest Education Completed	Current Outcome			Total
	Enrolled (and either Employed or not Employed)	Not Enrolled (and Employed)	Neither Enrolled nor Employed*	
Not completed PSE	392 21.0%	692 37.1%	224 12.0%	n=1,863 100.0%
Completed PSE after initial dropout	160 8.6%	303 16.3%	92 4.9%	
Entered college with PSE credential**				

Stopouts
Dropouts
Lifelong Learners
Employed (completed PSE)
Unemployed (completed PSE)

*Includes those who are both looking and not looking for work.

**This group also may or may not have obtained an additional PSE credential after initial drop-out.

Note: Excludes records with missing employment or enrolment status.

A considerable number (21.0%) had not completed any postsecondary education or resumed their studies. They are described as stopouts. Overall, 49.1 per cent of leavers could be considered ‘true’ dropouts – i.e., leavers who have not completed any PSE and are not currently enrolled. However, as will be seen later, a large share of these dropouts intends to return to PSE.

About 8.6 per cent were described as lifelong learners. This refers to those who have earned their credential since leaving their college or already had a college or university credential prior to enrolling at their college and are still currently pursuing another postsecondary education.

Sixteen per cent of leavers were currently employed or were pursuing a career (who were already holders of PSE credential), while the rest (4.9%), who had likewise completed PSE, were not currently engaged in any employment. It should be noted however, that 12 per cent of leavers did not have a PSE credential and are neither enrolled nor employed.

By academic achievement groups, leavers with a high GPA were more likely to be stopouts (24.9%) when compared to academically average (19.8%) and low-GPA leavers (20.9%) (Table 20). More high-achieving leavers were lifelong learners (15% vs. 9 and 7% of average- and low-GPA leavers, respectively) and were employed, being PSE credential holders (25% vs. 18 and 11% of average- and low-GPA leavers, respectively). Interestingly, more high-GPA leavers were also unemployed despite having completed PSE compared with the other groups. This proportion was still much smaller than that of employed high-GPA leavers.

Table 20. Current Outcome by GPA Category

	GPA Category			Total
	High	Average	Low	
Stopouts	53	150	165	368
	24.9%	19.8%	20.9%	20.9%
Dropouts	55	365	462	882
	25.8%	48.1%	58.6%	50.1%
Lifelong Learners	31	66	53	150
	14.6%	8.7%	6.7%	8.5%
Employed (completed PSE)	53	138	88	279
	24.9%	18.2%	11.2%	15.8%
Unemployed (completed PSE)	21	40	21	82
	9.9%	5.3%	2.7%	4.7%
Total	213	759	789	1761
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: As a percentage of students who answered the question, excluding 'don't know' and 'no response.'

Departure Factors vs. Immediate and Current Outcome

Examining the immediate pathway of leavers vis-à-vis their main reason for leaving revealed that 96.6 per cent of those whose departure was due to personal issues had completely discontinued their studies and were dropouts (Table 21). This proportion is higher than the 85.4 per cent of dropouts noted in the group of leavers whose departure was explained by academic or institutional issues.

Switchers, on the other hand, were more prevalent in the group that left due to academic/institutional reasons (14.6%) compared to the group whose departure was due to personal reasons (3.4%).

Table 21. Reasons Behind Departure vis-à-vis Pathways

		DEPARTURE FACTORS							
		Academic or Institutional Factors		Personal or Non-institutional Factors		Other		TOTAL	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Immediate Outcome	Dropouts	836	85.4	797	96.6	69	93.2	1702	90.6
	Switchers	143	14.6	28	3.4	5	6.8	176	9.4
		979	100.0	825	100.0	74	100.0	1878	100.0
Current Outcome	Dropouts	420	42.8	452	54.2	32	41.6	904	47.8
	Stopouts	260	26.5	114	13.7	9	11.7	383	20.2
	Lifelong Learners	95	9.7	54	6.5	4	5.2	153	8.1
	Employed (completed PSE) ¹	128	13.0	147	17.6	20	26.0	295	15.6
	Unemployed (completed PSE) ¹	36	3.7	47	5.6	8	10.4	91	4.8
		981	100.0	834	100.0	77	100.0	1892	100.0

Note: As a percentage of students who answered the question, excluding 'don't know' and 'no response.'

¹Includes leavers who completed PSE prior to starting program at their 'home college.'

Dropouts: Not currently enrolled and have not completed any postsecondary education (PSE); either employed or not employed

Switchers: Transferred to another school; not employed

Stopouts: Have not completed any PSE and currently enrolled; not employed

Lifelong Learners: Have already completed a PSE credential^{1/} and are still currently pursuing further education; employed or not employed

Employed (with PSE): Have already completed a PSE credential and currently employed

Unemployed (with PSE): Have already completed a PSE credential and currently not employed

In examining the current outcome, 26.5 per cent of the students who discontinued their studies due to academic reasons were described as stopouts. This was higher than the 13.7 per cent of those who cited that personal issues explained their departure. Further, a large percentage (54.2%) of those who left due to personal reasons were described as dropouts. This was greater than the proportion noted for those leavers with academic- or institutional-related departure reasons (42.8%).

As noted earlier, an individual student's trajectory from his/her first pathway (or what we termed as immediate outcome) to the second (or we called current outcome) was not explicit since this was not a longitudinal study. Nonetheless, examining the immediate vs. current snapshots of a student's post-departure outcome provides substantial evidence that would lead to a better understanding of early leavers' profile, persistence and goals.

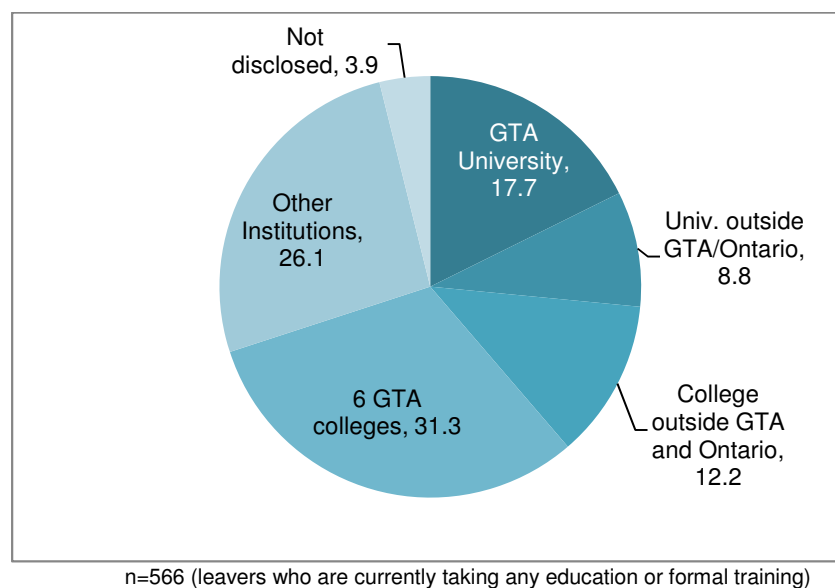
Inter-institutional Mobility

A recent study by Finnie and Qiu (2009) in Atlantic Canada showed that some students "switch" institutions over the course of their studies or stop out for a period of time. In this study, we specifically examined if early

leavers simply transferred from one GTA college to another. Results showed that 31 per cent have done so (Figure 10). It should be emphasized that 57 per cent of this group were taking a program that is different from the one they took at their 'home' college. Their top departure reasons included: (i) change in academic interest/plans; (ii) academic issues; and (iii) lost interest in or dissatisfaction with the program.

Also noteworthy was the group of students who are currently attending university (27%). It should be noted that this group also includes those who already had either a PSE experience or credential prior to enrolling at their 'home' college. A considerable number of leavers (26%) were attending a private college, an adult school or short-term informal courses. Twelve per cent have moved to a college outside the GTA or Ontario.

Figure 10. Inter-institutional Mobility



Satisfaction with Departure Decision

Leaving one's institution does not necessarily connote a negative or poor outcome from the student's or institution's perspective. In an attempt to examine the perception about their departure decision, respondents were asked about their satisfaction with their decision to discontinue studies at their college (Table 22). However, this satisfaction measure should not be regarded as an explicit indication that a leaver met his/her goal upon departure. This study did not probe the specific reason(s) behind satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This is therefore cited as a limitation of the study.

Across the colleges, 46.5 per cent of participants indicated being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their decision to leave, 29.1 per cent 'were dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' and 20.5 per cent expressed neutrality about their departure decision.

Table 22. Satisfaction with Departure Decision

	Count (n)	%
Satisfied and Very Satisfied	903	46.5
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	398	20.5
Dissatisfied and Very Dissatisfied	565	29.1
Don't Know/Prefer not to Answer	74	3.8
	1940	100.0

Table 23. Current Outcome and Satisfaction with Departure Decision

	Employed	Enrolled (not Employed)	Employed and Enrolled	Neither Employed nor Enrolled
	<i>Percentage</i>			
Satisfied and Very Satisfied	42.8 [424]	64.5 [127]	63.3 [228]	40.1 [127]
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	23.9 [237]	14.7 [29]	18.6 [67]	19.9 [63]
Dissatisfied and Very Dissatisfied	33.3 [330]	20.8 [41]	18.1 [65]	40.1 [127]

Note: Numbers of total responses are in brackets.

Second, we looked at the group which is currently studying by the type of institution that they are currently enrolled in. Compared with the other sub-groups, those who are currently attending university have higher satisfaction (Table 24).

Table 24. Current Institution vs. Satisfaction with Departure Decision

	Currently enrolled in ...			
	Six GTA Colleges	University	Colleges Outside GTA and Ontario	Other Schools
	<i>Percentage</i>			
Satisfied and Very Satisfied	66.1 [115]	78.7 [118]	59.2 [42]	48.9 [69]
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	16.7 [29]	8.7 [13]	21.1 [15]	25.5 [36]
Dissatisfied and Very Dissatisfied	17.2 [30]	12.7 [19]	19.7 [14]	25.5 [36]

Note: Numbers of total responses are in brackets.

Third, we examined the primary reasons for leaving. A higher proportion of leavers who left due to academic- or institutional-related issues indicated satisfaction with their decision. Dissatisfied leavers were more common in the group where departures were explained by personal or non-academic reasons, such as financial matters and family/personal/health reasons (Table 25).

Table 25. Factors Behind Departure and Satisfaction with Decision

	Main Reason for Leaving		
	Personal/Non-academic	Academic or Institutional	Other
	<i>Percentage</i>		
Satisfied and Very Satisfied	39.2	55.0	43.2
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	21.3	20.1	17.6
Dissatisfied and Very Dissatisfied	35.8	23.2	20.0
No Answer/Don't Know	3.7	1.7	19.2

And the last aspect tested was whether there was a linear correlation between a student's satisfaction with the overall college experience and the decision to leave one's institution. Did leavers who were dissatisfied with their experience at their college end up being satisfied with their departure decision? This hypothesis was eventually dismissed because the calculated negative correlation between these two parameters was too weak to support this interpretation.³

Also worth noting is that satisfaction with the departure decision bears no association with the following: (i) if current employment is related to program of study; (ii) if students were enrolled in their first choice institution; and (iii) program area of study.

Intention to Resume Studies

³ Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Leavers who are not currently attending school were asked about their intention to continue PSE. About 85.5 per cent of the ‘true’ dropouts had plans to continue their studies. However, 15 per cent were either uncertain (9%) or had no intention at all (6.0%).

Regardless of whether they planned to take the same or a different program, 72.2% per cent of this group intended to return in the next semester or within the next year⁴ (Table 26). About 16.5 per cent would like to return in the next two to five years, while 11.2 per cent expressed uncertainty about when to resume their studies

Table 26. Plans to Resume Studies

	TOTAL		Same Program		Different Program	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Next term/semester	408	37.7	227	38.7	173	40.3
Sometime within the next year	373	34.5	201	34.3	150	35.0
Sometime in the next 2-5 years	179	16.5	95	16.2	69	16.1
Not sure when	121	11.2	62	10.6	37	8.6
I prefer not to answer	1	0.1	1	0.2	0	0.0
TOTAL	1082	100.0	591	100.0	429	100.0

Note: Excludes ‘don’t know if same or different program’ responses.

For the 15 per cent who either had no intention of or were uncertain about returning to school, 59.7 per cent were engaged in full-time employment at the time of the survey. About 32.6 per cent were either in part-time employment or were not working but still looking for work, while the rest (7.7%) were attending to personal matters.

Future intention to resume studies significantly correlated with one’s satisfaction with the decision to leave. Specifically, leavers who were dissatisfied with their departure decision were more likely to have the intention to return to school.⁵ As earlier noted, leavers who discontinued due to non-academic or personal issues and challenges were significantly more dissatisfied with their decision to leave. However, there was no significant indication that a student’s reason to depart was associated with his/her intention to return to school.

Fifty-four per cent of those who were not enrolled at the time of the survey (either employed or unemployed) were interested in returning to their ‘home’ college. To a large majority, this intention likewise came with the plan to take the same program in which they were enrolled at their former college.

At this point, it is known that a large majority has the explicit intention of returning to their home college. It is of prime interest to identify what this group said about what their college could have done to help them earn their credential. The majority (64%) of those who expressed intentions to resume their postsecondary education indicated that their home college could have helped them complete their program with academic support, college services support and financial support. These support services speak to the top reasons that they cited to explain their departure – i.e., family/personal/health, financial and academic issues. This group was primarily identified as including academically capable students – i.e., 47 and 45 per cent earned average and high GPAs, respectively.

⁴ From the time the survey was conducted.

⁵ $P = 0.000$, using Kruskal-Wallis test.

Positive Attrition

In many cases, students leave and may return at a later date to the same or a different institution (Grayson and Grayson, 2003). This pattern of participation may account for what is called positive attrition. In positive attrition situations, students achieved their goals prior to completing their program and possibly gained employment. Alternately, students may have realized that a course or program was not appropriate to their needs and aspirations. However, they would be grouped with the rest of the drop-outs and thus create a somewhat misleading overall institutional picture (McGivney, 2003).

The varying scenarios of positive attrition were not the primary focus of this study, but the issue undoubtedly merits a full research endeavor in itself. As earlier noted, there was no explicit question in the survey concerning whether a leaver met his/her goal upon leaving the institution. However, we tried to capture possible cases of positive attrition based on what is implicitly conveyed by the data.

We propose two measures of positive attrition.

The first measure is defined as a situation where leavers without previous PSE discontinued their college program to move to university. Attrition is defined as positive in this context mainly because it reflects the preparatory role of college education towards university education. Across the colleges, 22.4 per cent of leavers without previous PSE and who were currently attending postsecondary education were enrolled in a university located either in or outside the GTA (Table 27). Although this may only account for 5 per cent of the total leaver population, this sub-group is considerably distinct and should be accounted for in understandings of the overall early leaver population.

The second measure of positive attrition is meant to refer to a situation where leavers without previous PSE discontinued their non-degree college program to move to a degree program – even if this should mean moving to another college.⁶ A couple of limitations are cited here though. First, the student background data used in this analysis does not account for the type of credential that a student was pursuing prior to leaving (i.e., whether degree or non-degree). Secondly, the survey did not examine whether a leaver eventually transferred to a degree credential at another college. Hence, positive attrition is not explicit in the 47.2 per cent of those who re-enrolled in another college.

In conclusion, future research should account for the information gaps cited above. Overall, it is important to determine whether a student has left their college in order to transfer to a degree program, either offered at another college or in university, in order to ensure an exhaustive, system-wide calculation of graduation or retention rates as measures of both student and institutional success.

⁶ The methodological framework of this study indicates that a student who discontinued a non-degree program to move to a degree program at their 'home' college is not considered an early leaver.

Table 27. Type of Institutions Currently Attended by PSE Experience Prior to College Entry

	Without Previous PSE	With Previous PSE	TOTAL
	<i>Percentage</i>		
GTA-CAAT Colleges	33.7 [137]	24.7 [39]	31.2 [176]
University	22.4 [91]	37.3 [59]	26.6 [150]
CAAT and Other Colleges Outside Ontario	13.5 [55]	10.8 [17]	12.8 [72]
Other Schools	26.8 [109]	22.8 [36]	25.7 [145]
TOTAL¹	100.0 [406]	100.0 [158]	100.0 [564]

¹ Includes 'not disclosed' (n=21) which are not itemized above.
Note: Numbers of total responses are in brackets.

Furthermore, positive attrition that could be equated with gainful employment was not explicitly evidenced in this study. Specifically, it was not strongly conclusive that the relevance of one's job to one's program of study was associated with either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's departure decision. However, it is worth noting that 10 per cent of leavers were both satisfied or very satisfied with their educational experience and were in jobs related to their program of study. Additionally, 7 per cent of all leavers were satisfied or very satisfied with their decision to leave college and were also in a job related to their program.

Conclusions

This study acknowledges that no comparison was conducted between early leavers and those who completed the program at their 'home' college. However, there are substantial findings in this study that could inform strategies to maximize student retention. Foremost is the indication that 90 per cent of leavers have completely discontinued their postsecondary education immediately after departure and a high majority of them prioritized employment. At the time the survey was conducted, almost half of leavers had not earned a PSE credential since their initial departure and had not resumed any formal or informal studies. About eight out of every ten of them had jobs that were either 'somewhat' or 'fully' related to their program of study. Furthermore, 85 per cent of them indicated intentions to resume their studies in the immediate future. It is crucial to examine the goals vis-à-vis the program completion rate of this group – i.e., how far they are from completing their program. An understanding of this would be helpful in possibly contextualizing a re-absorption strategy that could align student needs and institutional resources. Equally important is the vital role of an exit interview as a venue for the colleges to inform the leaving students about the appropriate educational pathways available, which may not be previously known to them.

Two aspects of this study do not exist in other retention research: (1) analyzing early departures according to academic achievement groups, as measured by cumulative GPA; and (2) identifying positive attrition. Both of these elements can contribute to closing some knowledge gaps in our understanding of the complex nature of student attrition. For instance, leaving early is usually counted as a negative transaction entry in the calculation of graduation and retention rate. We have identified the 6 per cent of leavers who left their 'home' college primarily to move to university (70% of them had no previous PSE) and the 22.4 per cent of all leavers without previous PSE who were attending university at the time of the survey, primarily among high-GPA leavers. These two scenarios could mean that these students had earned adequate credits and/or grades to qualify for university study, regardless of whether university transfer was their goal prior to entering college or was a subsequent result of change in academic interests. Though these aspects connote student or institutional success, they are unaccounted for in Ontario colleges' existing calculation of graduation and retention rate. Not accounting for these aspects will always provide a less-than-adequate landscape of student and institutional success and dismisses the fact that there are attrition factors that should not be counted against either the individuals or the institutions.

Approximately 30 per cent of students discontinued their program prior to completing their first semester of study. This was especially true for low-GPA leavers. Institutions should proactively execute early identification processes and exit interviews of the pool of entering first-semester students who drop out at the early stage of the semester. Data collected from these withdrawing students will be crucial in the identification of trends and causes of student departure. Faculty can play a key role in early identification strategies, particularly since the results show that students often turn to them for advice.

In concordance with much of the existing early attrition literature, this project likewise depicts challenging (low to moderate) levels of academic and social engagement among leavers. Although we did not compare leavers' engagement activities with that of their non-leaving counterparts, our findings should spur institutions to further examine how they engage their students, whether communication strategies to strengthen existing engagement initiatives are effective, and most importantly to understand whether extra-curricular engagement opportunities align with student interests.

References

- Government of Alberta. (2006). *Alberta post-secondary early leavers study*. Edmonton: Alberta Advanced Education.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. USA: Jossey-Bass.
- Conway, C. (2001). *The 2000 British Columbia Universities Early Leavers Survey*. Prepared for the University Presidents' Council of British Columbia. Co-published by the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology and the Centre for Education Information.
- Decock, H., & Lopez, T. (2004). *Seneca College Early Leaver Survey*. Toronto: Seneca College.
- Finnie, R., & Qiu, T. (2008). "Is the Glass (or Classroom) Half-Empty or Nearly Full? New Evidence on Persistence in Post-Secondary Education in Canada" In Ross Finnie *et al.*, eds., *Who Stays? Who Goes? What Matters? Accessing and Persisting in Post-Secondary Education in Canada*. Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Finnie, R., & Qiu, T. (2009). *Moving through, moving on: Persistence in postsecondary education in Atlantic Canada*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Finnie, R., Childs, S., & Qiu, H. (2010). *The Patterns of Persistence in Post-Secondary Education Among College Students in Ontario: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data*. Toronto: Colleges Ontario.
- Finnie, R., Childs, S., & Qui, T. (2012). *Patterns of Persistence in Postsecondary Education: New Evidence for Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
- Grayson, J. P., & Grayson, K. (2003). *Research on retention and attrition*. Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Lambert, M., Zeman, K., Allen, M., & Bussière, P. (2004). *Who pursues postsecondary education, who leaves, and why: Results from the Youth in Transition Survey*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- Ma, X., & Frempong, G. (2008). *Reasons for Non-Completion of Postsecondary Education and Profile of Postsecondary Dropouts*. Ottawa: HRSDC.
- McGivney, V. (2003). *Staying or Leaving the course: Non-completion and retention of mature students in further and higher education*. UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Prairie Research Associates. (2007). *Survey of Early Leavers: Universities and Colleges in Manitoba*. Retrieved from: http://www.copse.mb.ca/pdf/reports/survey_of_early_leavers_final_report.pdf
- Thomas, S. L. (2000). Ties that bind: A social network approach to understanding student integration and persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(5), pp. 591-615.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zhao, H., & McCloy, U. (2009). *Mining Ontario's Student Satisfaction Survey: What do the results tell us about learning quality and graduation rates?* Paper presented at the 2009 Canadian Institutional Research and Planning Association Conference, Banff, Alberta.



Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario