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Short-term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education

Student Background and Institutional Differences in Reasons for Early Departure, 1996-98

Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Reports:

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This report builds on previous studies of early attrition¹ from postsecondary education by providing a more comprehensive look at students' reasons for early total departure from postsecondary education.² Using the 1996/98 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/98) to examine attrition in the first 3 years of postsecondary education, this study addresses two main issues: student background characteristics associated with departure without a credential from postsecondary education, and among students who did leave, the reasons they gave for their departure. With respect to both issues, this report focuses on understanding how the process of departure from college differs for students who begin at 2-year compared with 4-year institutions. The analysis includes only students who began at these two types of institutions, and it is also restricted to students at public or private not-for-profit institutions, rather than for-profit institutions. The following provides a summary of the key findings for each of the five main questions answered in the report.

¹In this report, "attrition," "departure," and "leaving college" all refer to 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students departing without receiving a credential and not returning by spring 1998. This pattern is also described as "early attrition" or "short-term enrollment."

²Total (or system) departure, in which students leave postsecondary education altogether, is distinct from institutional departure, in which students leave one institution but enroll at another (Tinto 1993). This report only examines departure from postsecondary education entirely (i.e., total departure).

What proportion of students left college without a credential and did not return in the first 3 years?

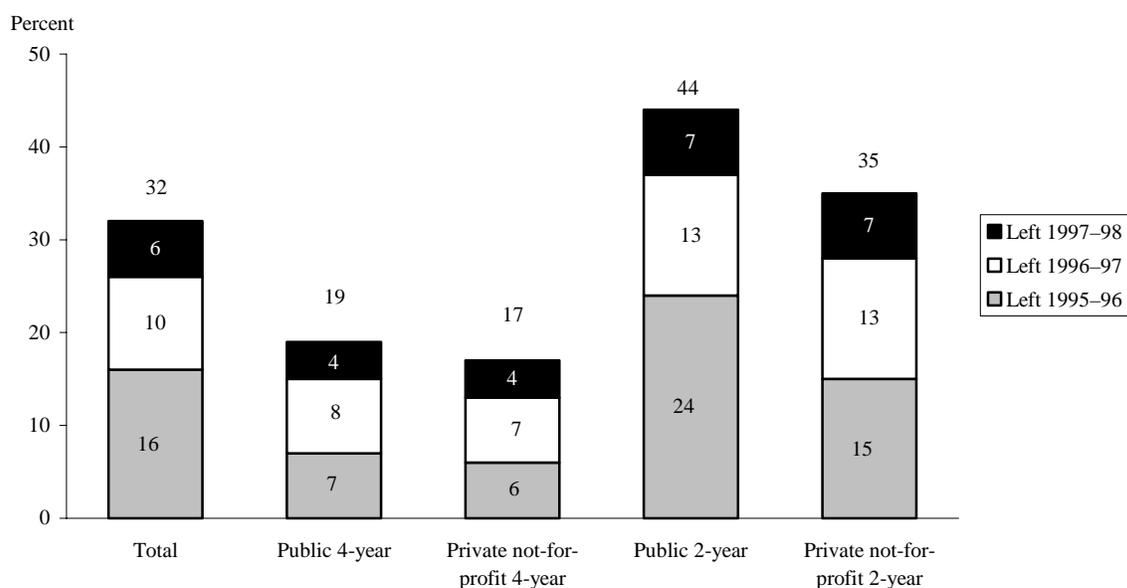
While almost one-third (32 percent) of beginning postsecondary students left without a credential within 3 academic years (figure A), students who began at 4-year institutions were less likely than those who began at 2-year institutions to do so (17–19 percent versus 35–44 percent).

The percentage of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students who left without a credential and did not return by spring 1998 was greatest in the first year of enrollment and smallest in the third year of enrollment. Among students who began at public 4-year institutions, fewer left in the third year than in the first or second year of enrollment, but no differences were detected between departure rates in the first 2 years. No differences were detected by year in the percentages of students beginning at private not-for-profit 4-year institutions who left. The percentage of public 2-year college students who left school within the first year was larger than that from any other type of institution.

What factors were associated with early departure from postsecondary education by institution type?

A number of student characteristics were associated with departure from public 4-year, private not-for-profit 4-year, and public 2-year institutions. While many characteristics were

Figure A.—Percentage of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students who left without a credential and did not return by spring 1998, by first institution type and last year of attendance



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/98 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/98).

associated with departure from all three types of institutions, some differences were detected only among students from public and private not-for-profit 4-year institutions.

Students' Educational Expectations

Not all students plan to complete a degree when they enter college. Among all beginning postsecondary students in 1995–96, the expectations and objectives of students who began at public 2-year institutions differed from those of students who began at 4-year institutions. Even among students who began at public 2-year institutions, educational expectations were relatively high (i.e., higher than could be accomplished at a 2-year institution): 33 percent eventually expected to complete a bachelor's degree, and another 29 percent expected to complete an advanced degree, i.e., a degree

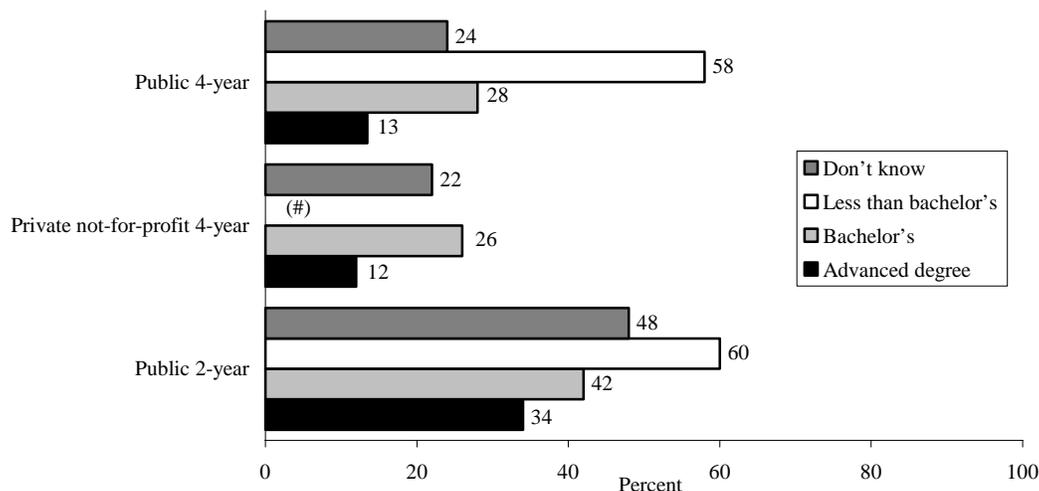
beyond the bachelor's. But students who began at public 2-year institutions were less likely than students who began at 4-year institutions (59 percent at both public and private not-for-profit 4-year institutions) to expect to complete an advanced degree. They were also more likely to expect that their eventual educational attainment would be *less* than a bachelor's degree (16 percent versus 1–2 percent of those who began at 4-year institutions). Finally, students who began at community colleges expressed a range of reasons for enrolling at such an institution: 38 percent indicated that they chose that institution to prepare for transfer to a 4-year college or university; 22 percent chose the institution to gain job skills; and another 16 percent enrolled for personal enrichment.

Among students at all three types of institutions, both the eventual educational

expectations of students and their initial degree objectives at the first institution attended were associated with departure from postsecondary education within 3 years. Among students who identified the level of education they ultimately expected to complete, those who identified higher expected levels of education were less likely than those who identified lower expected levels to leave college (figure B). In addition, those who did not know their expected eventual educational outcome were more likely than those who expected to complete advanced degrees to leave within 3 years.

Furthermore, initial degree objectives from the *first* institution at which the student enrolled were associated with departure from postsecondary education among students at all three types of institutions, with lower objectives generally associated with a higher rate of departure. For example, among students who began at public 4-year institutions, 40 percent of those whose degree objectives at their first institution did not include a bachelor's degree left postsecondary education within 3 years, compared with 16 percent of those who did plan to get a bachelor's degree there. This relationship was found even after taking into account many other factors associated with departure.

Figure B.—Percentage of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students who left without a credential and did not return by spring 1998, by education expectations and first institution type



#Too small to report.

NOTE: Refers to student's response to the question, "What is the highest level of education you ever expect to complete?" when asked during the base year (1995–96) interview.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/98 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/98).

Other Characteristics

Lower academic performance during the first year of enrollment was associated with a higher rate of attrition at all three types of institutions, even when taking into account other factors related to departure from postsecondary education. Transfer between institutions and changes in number of dependents from their initial entry into college until 1998 were also associated with their departure among students who began at public institutions, even when other variables were taken into consideration. Those who transferred to another institution were less likely to have left college. In addition, students from all three types of institutions who had more dependents in 1998 than when they began college had higher rates of attrition than those who never had dependents. For example, among students who began at public 2-year institutions, 61 percent of those who subsequently had children left college by 1998, compared with 37 percent of those who never had children. Thus, changes such as these that can occur during students' postsecondary enrollment may supersede the effects of their initial enrollment characteristics.

Furthermore, when examining nontraditional student characteristics,³ students with nontraditional characteristics were often more likely to leave within 3 years than their counterparts without these characteristics. For example, among students who began at public 4-year institutions, those who delayed postsecondary enrollment more than a year after high school were more likely than those who had gone directly to college (33 versus 15 percent) to depart. Among

³Nontraditional student characteristics include the following: being 24 years old or older, delaying postsecondary enrollment by more than a year after high school, enrolling less than full time, being independent, working full time, being currently or previously married, being a single parent, having dependents, or not having a regular high school diploma.

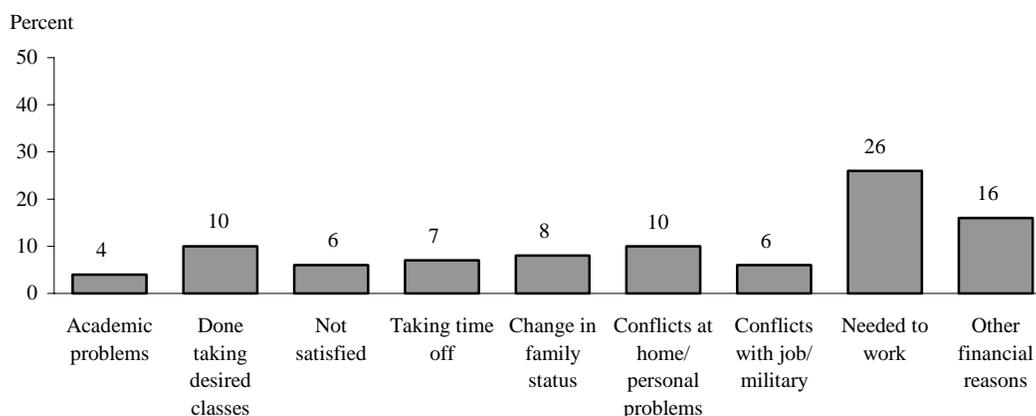
students who began at private not-for-profit 4-year colleges and universities, 62 percent of those who had ever been married when first enrolled had departed within 3 years without a credential, compared with 15 percent of those who had never been married. At public 2-year institutions, students who worked part time or did not work while they were enrolled were less likely than those who worked full time (33 and 43 percent, respectively, versus 59 percent) to leave college. These relationships were found even when taking into account other factors associated with departure.

Some characteristics, however, were associated with departure from 4-year institutions, but not public 2-year institutions. Students facing a lower price of attendance were more likely to depart from 4-year institutions, while this relationship was not found among students who began at public 2-year institutions after taking other factors into account. In addition, among students who began at 4-year institutions, attending colleges with higher graduation rates was associated with lower attrition. However, this relationship was not detected among students who began at public 2-year institutions.

What reasons did these short-term enrollees give for their departure?

The 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students who left by 1998 without a credential gave a variety of reasons for their departure (figure C). Students were generally more likely to say that they left because they needed to work or to give other financial reasons for their departure than to give other types of reasons. About one-quarter (26 percent) of short-term enrollees cited needing to work as a reason for their departure, and 16 percent identified other financial reasons. Ten percent said that they had completed their desired

Figure C.—Percentage of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students leaving by spring 1998 who gave various reasons for their departure



NOTE: Respondents could give up to three reasons, including other reasons not listed here. Sixty-one percent identified only one of these reasons, and 24 percent did not cite any of these reasons.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/98 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/98).

classes or that they had conflicts at home or personal problems; 8 percent cited a change in their family status; 7 percent said they were taking time off from their studies; 6 percent reported that they were not satisfied or that they had conflicts with their jobs; and 4 percent identified academic problems as a cause of their departure.

Among students who left, those who began at 4-year institutions were more likely than those who began at public 2-year institutions to say that they left because of academic problems (9 versus 2 percent) or a change in family status (12 versus 6 percent). Those who began at public 2-year institutions were more likely than those who began at 4-year institutions to say they left because they were done taking the classes they wanted (12 versus 5 percent) or because they needed to work (29 versus 17 percent).

What other characteristics of short-term enrollees were associated with their reasons for departure?

Among beginning postsecondary students who left early, women were more likely than men to say that they left because of a change in family status or because of conflicts at home or personal problems. In contrast, men were more likely than women to say they left because of academic problems or because they needed to work. Higher income students who left were less likely than their lower income counterparts to say that they left because of a change in family status. In addition, students in the middle two income quartiles were more likely than those in the highest quartile to leave because they needed to work (30 versus 13 percent).

Although short-term enrollees cited academic problems relatively infrequently as a reason for their departure, the evidence above showed that first-year grades were consistently associated with

early attrition in all institution types. There was some evidence that students without nontraditional characteristics were more likely than those with these characteristics to cite academic problems as a cause of departure from postsecondary education. Students who enrolled full time during their first year were more likely than students who had mixed patterns of attendance or who attended part time to report academic problems as a cause of their early departure (7 versus 0.2 and 2 percent, respectively). In addition, short-term enrollees who worked more hours while enrolled during their first year of postsecondary education were less likely than those who worked fewer hours to say they left because of academic problems.

Were differences in reasons for departure by institution type found after controlling for other characteristics?

The results suggest that the reasons for leaving differ between students who began at public 2-year institutions and those who began at 4-year institutions. These differences may be related to the different student populations at 2-year compared with 4-year institutions. For example, reasons given for departure varied between students with and without various nontraditional characteristics, and these students also differed with respect to the types of institutions in which they began their postsecondary education. Students with nontraditional characteristics (such as not having a regular high school diploma or being financially independent) who left were less likely than students without these characteristics to report that they left because of academic problems, as did short-term enrollees who began at 2-year institutions compared with those who began at 4-year institutions. On the other hand, students with nontraditional characteristics who left

postsecondary education without a credential were more likely than those without these characteristics to say they were done taking the classes they wanted, as were short-term enrollees who began at public 2-year institutions compared with those who began at 4-year institutions. Among all beginning students as well as among those who left early, students from public 2-year institutions were more likely than those from 4-year institutions to have nontraditional student characteristics.

After taking into account other factors associated with various reasons for departure, short-term enrollees who began at public 2-year institutions were still less likely than those who began at 4-year institutions to say they left because of a change in family status and more likely to say they left because they needed to work. In the multivariate analyses, no differences were found in the rates at which short-term enrollees from different types of institutions reported leaving because of academic problems or because they had completed the classes they wanted. However, in both cases, initial degree objectives were related to leaving: those who planned to complete a bachelor's degree at their first institution were more likely to leave for academic reasons than those who planned to complete an associate's degree, and those who did not plan to obtain any credential from their first institution were more likely than others to leave because they were done taking the classes they wanted.

Other Results

Among students who left college within 3 years of first enrollment, some of the reasons they gave were consistent with their characteristics. For example, middle-income students were more likely than high income students to say they left because they needed to work. Students who had

never intended to complete a credential of any kind from the institution where they began were more likely than those seeking a degree or certificate to indicate that they left because they were finished. However, this reason was not given by even a majority of those with no degree goals, suggesting that other factors may have deterred them.

Relatively few student characteristics were associated with leaving because of a change in family status. However, students who had more dependents in 1998 than when they began postsecondary enrollment were more likely than others to say they left because of a change in family status. In addition, women were more likely

than men to cite this cause. These results are consistent with other literature on this reason for leaving college (Bonham and Luckie 1993).

While academic problems were not frequently cited as a cause for student departure, students who had lower grades were more likely to give this reason than those with higher grades. However, this relationship was not found once other factors were taken into account. In the multivariate model, not working while enrolled and full-time enrollment were associated with leaving for academic reasons. These results suggest that leaving because of academic problems is more common among students who do not have nontraditional characteristics.