



CAMPUS
ASSESSMENT
WORKING GROUP

**A Delicate Balance:
Stop-outs and Transfer-outs
Tell Their Story**

2007 Report

**By members of the
Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG)
Retention Subgroup**



CAWG

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Executive Summary

WHY

In any given semester, between 1500 and 3000 undergraduate students discontinue their enrollment at the University of Maryland, either temporarily or permanently, prior to graduation. Although the Counseling Center and the Office of the Registrar routinely collect information from those who withdraw *during* a semester, much less is known about those who choose not to return from one semester to the next. This initiative seeks to provide new data and insight into students' reasons behind their decision to leave.

WHO

Our study attempted to contact 2935 undergraduates who entered UM in the Fall of 2002, 2003, or 2004, as full-time degree-seeking **direct admits** or **transfers**, and were not registered as of the "freeze date" of the Fall 2005 semester. These students also had not graduated by Fall 2005 nor were they studying abroad through a UM-supported program that semester. Respondents returned 214 usable surveys.

WHEN

July 2006.

HOW

We attempted to contact potential respondents by:

- 1) sending messages to their last known email address,
- 2) sending a postcard to their last known permanent address, and
- 3) sending an automated phone message to their last known permanent phone number.

As an incentive to participate, potential respondents were offered the chance to receive one of twenty \$50 gift certificates to either Target or Best Buy.

WHAT

Students responding to a brief online survey were asked to do the following:

- (1) Identify which of 70 issues typically associated with leaving school were *major* reasons, *minor* reasons, or *not* reasons. Issues were organized by the following categories:

Transportation	Academic	Housing
Employment	Family	Campus climate
Financial	Personal	

- (2) Indicate if they planned to return to UM, or transfer to another institution, or discontinue enrollment in higher education;

- (3) Respond to the following open-ended questions designed to encourage more in-depth introspection in order to tell "their story."

What might the University have done to help you stay enrolled?

What might you have done differently to stay enrolled?

Other comments about your discontinued enrollment at the University of Maryland.

LIMITATIONS

The low response rate (<10%) was due in part to the lack of accuracy and recency of the contact information, since the target population included students whose last semester may have been Fall 2002. Further, given the topic of the online survey – their discontinued enrollment at UM – there may also have been a self-selection bias. These limitations suggest that survey results are not generalizable to the entire target population.

THEIR STORY

Among our respondents:

43% indicated they either planned to reenroll at UM or had already reenrolled.

54% had transferred to another institution or planned to.

2% either reported they had no plans to enroll in higher education, or did not respond to the question about their plans. The number in this group was so small they were excluded from the rest of this report.

We looked at the top ten major reasons behind the decision to discontinue enrollment. The quotes on the following pages are taken from the open-ended responses and illustrate these major themes.

...for those who plan to reenroll at UM or already had.

Grades
Cost of tuition / fees too high
Inadequate financial aid
Lack of focus or direction
Loss of motivation
Cost of books / supplies too high
Cost of living in area too high
Did not have good study habits
Had trouble balancing work and school
Encountered unexpected expenses

...for those who plan to transfer elsewhere, or already had.

Academic services / advising not helpful
Cost of tuition / fees too high
Inadequate financial aid
Not enough interaction / attention from faculty
Too many people in classes
Dissatisfied with the quality of instruction
Depression / anxiety
UM did not have desired program / major
Felt like an outsider
Loss of motivation

For some students, the decision to leave the University, whether temporarily or permanently, is a straightforward matter. The reason may be a family or medical crisis, overstretched finances, or a lack of fit between a student's needs and UM. In these cases, the decision to return to college, at UM or some other school, is also straightforward, once the situation has been resolved or ameliorated.

Many other students, however, leave the University under less clear circumstances. Rather than a single event or reason dictating the withdrawal, a confluence of reasons – “major” and/or “minor” – occurs to make further attendance, at least in the short-term, untenable. While individual factors such as inadequate advising or teaching, the stress of commuting, finances, loneliness, homesickness, and roommate conflicts may not, in and of themselves, be sufficient to convince someone to leave, their synergy can overwhelm a student, especially one whose coping resources may be compromised or reduced.

83% indicated major or minor reasons in 2 or more categories;

58% indicated reasons in 4 or more.

It's important to note that while the University has some measure of control over some of these issues (e.g., advising, teaching, resource information dissemination), many of the conditions leading to withdrawal are beyond the University's reach.

It would be wise for the University to focus on improving what it can, and realize that it cannot, and should not, act to keep all students from withdrawing. In many cases, leaving the University at that time is truly in the best interest of the student.

Background

In any given semester, between 1500 and 3000 undergraduate students discontinue their enrollment at the University of Maryland, either temporarily or permanently, prior to graduation. Although the Counseling Center and the Office of the Registrar routinely collect information from those who withdraw *during* a semester, much less is known about those who choose not to return from one semester to the next. These are students who stop-out for various reasons to return at a later date, or transfer to another campus, or permanently drop out because of academic performance or to pursue other opportunities. Because of the considerable number of students who leave the university in this way, it is vital to better understand the reasons for their withdrawal. This initiative seeks to provide new data and insight into students' reasons behind their decision to leave.

As displayed in Table 1, the university has lost nearly 1,900 students, either temporarily or permanently, over the three years targeted for this study when looking at only three Fall cohorts of students. A minority of those not returning are academic dismissals (77 students) or students who officially withdrew during a semester.

Table 1. Number of students who left the university by cohort year departure status: Fall 2005

Cohort	Number of Non- returning Students [†]	Number of Students Academically Dismissed
Fall 2002	896	14
Fall 2003	741	22
Fall 2004	299	41

[†] This number includes students who were academically dismissed. It may also include students who have subsequently returned to the university after fall 2005.

Table 2 shows how many students have made a significant investment in their education before withdrawing or stopping out from the university. Eighty-eight percent of the Fall 2002 cohort left the university with more than 91 credits and eighty-four percent of the Fall 2003 cohort left with more than 61 credits. Two-thirds of the Fall 2004 cohort left with more than 31 credits. (It should be noted that there is an increase in Fall 2004 first year student withdrawals due to the new Student Success Policy). This study seeks to understand the reasons why students leave despite this academic investment.

Table 2. Number of students who left the university by cohort year and class standing: Fall 2005

Cohort	Freshman Level (0-30 credits)		Sophomore Level (31-60 credits)		Junior Level (61-90 credits)		Senior Level (91+ credits)	
	Number	% in Cohort	Number	% in Cohort	Number	% in Cohort	Number	% in Cohort
Fall 2002	0	0	26	3	80	9	790	88
Fall 2003	9	1	112	15	312	42	308	42
Fall 2004	87	29	105	35	68	23	39	13

Note: Between the Fall of 2002 and the Fall of 2004, the University instituted the "Student Success Policy" which has more stringent guidelines for successful progression to degree. As a result, the number of academic dismissals in the first year of study has increased. As a result of this policy, the number of students leaving the University in their first year has greatly increased.

The questionnaire

To better understand what happens to students who stop-out, transfer-out, or drop-out, the CAWG Retention Subgroup developed a brief online survey to be administered to students who left the university. This survey included 70 issues grouped into the eight categories typically associated with leaving school. The questions were crafted primarily based upon current CAWG and university surveys, especially the Withdrawal Survey which is given to students withdrawing during a semester. The online survey requested students to identify which issues were *major* reasons, *minor* reasons, or *not a reason* for their departure. The eight topic areas included:

- transportation;
- academic;
- housing;
- employment;
- family;
- campus climate;
- financial;
- personal issues.

Under each of these sections we allowed for respondents to elaborate on their issues through comments. At the end of the survey, we included three additional open ended questions:

- What might the University have done to help you stay enrolled?
- What might you have done differently to stay enrolled?
- Other comments about your discontinued enrollment at the University of Maryland.

See Appendix A for a copy of the online survey.

Methodology

Our study attempted to contact 2935 undergraduates who entered UM in the Fall of 2002, 2003, or 2004, as full-time degree-seeking **direct admits** or **transfers**, and were not registered as of the "freeze date" of the Fall 2005 semester. These students also had not graduated by Fall 2005 nor were they studying abroad through a UM-supported program that semester.

We attempted to contact potential respondents by:

- 1) sending messages to their last known email address,

- 2) sending a postcard to their last known permanent address, and
- 3) sending an automated phone message to their last known permanent phone number.

See Appendix B for a copy of the correspondence sent to the students.

As an incentive to participate, we offered potential respondents the chance to receive one of twenty \$50 gift certificates to either Target or Best Buy. Respondents returned 214 usable surveys.

Survey respondents

The survey had a low response rate (<10%) due in part to the lack of accuracy and recency of the contact information, especially since the target population included students whose last semester may have been Fall 2002. Further, given the topic of the online survey – their discontinued enrollment at UM – there may also have been a self-selection bias. These limitations suggest that survey results are not generalizable to the entire target population. We elected to report only very basic descriptive statistics and qualitative information in this report. Because the response rate is so low, no demographic information will be reported about the respondents.

Findings

As a result of the low response rate to the questionnaire, qualitative methods were used for this study to identify issues that students indicate affect their enrollment. The quantitative data were also used to verify the design of the survey (i.e. did we identify most of the issues that students experience when leaving the university) and to supplement findings in the students' comments.

Overview

Overall, 43% of the respondents indicated they either planned to reenroll at UM or had already reenrolled, and 54% had transferred to another institution or planned to. Two percent either reported they had no plans to enroll in higher education, or did not respond to the question about their plans. The number in this group was so small they were excluded from the rest of this report.

We looked at the top ten major reasons behind the decision to discontinue enrollment. The figure below lists the top ten reasons for departure for students who planned to re-enroll (or who already have re-enrolled) and students who transferred or plan to transfer to another institution.

...for those who plan to reenroll at UM or already had.	...for those who plan to transfer elsewhere, or already had.
Grades	Academic services / advising not helpful
Cost of tuition / fees too high	Cost of tuition / fees too high
Inadequate financial aid	Inadequate financial aid
Lack of focus or direction	Not enough interaction / attention from faculty
Loss of motivation	Too many people in classes
Cost of books / supplies too high	Dissatisfied with the quality of instruction
Cost of living in area too high	Depression / anxiety
Did not have good study habits	UM did not have desired program / major
Had trouble balancing work and school	Felt like an outsider
Encountered unexpected expenses	Loss of motivation

For some students, the decision to leave the University, whether temporarily or permanently, is a straightforward matter. The reason may be a family or medical crisis, overstretched finances, or a lack of fit between a student's needs and UM. In these cases, the decision to return to college, at UM or some other school, is also straightforward, once the situation has been resolved or ameliorated. We conducted a qualitative analysis of the open-ended write-in questions of the survey to better understand the reasons behind stop-out or transfer.

Qualitative analysis of student departure

At the conclusion of the Non-Returning Student Survey, respondents were asked three open-ended questions. First, they were asked to indicate what *UM* might have done to help them stay enrolled. Second, they were asked to indicate what *they* might have done differently to stay enrolled. Lastly,

respondents were provided with a text box in which they could enter any other comments they had about their discontinued enrollment.

We included these open-ended items on the survey in order to allow respondents to tell their stories in their own words. The qualitative data would provide detailed descriptions of the respondents' experiences, a piece of the story which could not be captured through the quantitative items alone. This in-depth, comprehensive information demonstrates the complex interrelationships among the reasons behind withdrawal, and the context in which respondents frame their experiences, opinions, and decisions. As is a limitation with all qualitative data, these findings are not generalizable to the population of non-returning students at the University of Maryland. However, these detailed responses help to shed light on the personal experiences of a few of these individuals.

Three major themes emerged from the qualitative survey responses. The reasons behind discontinued enrollment, as described by the respondents, tended to fall into the following topic areas: Financial, Personal/Emotional, and Institutional. These categories mirror the types of response options included in the quantitative portion of the survey.

Within each of the three themes, we first provide detailed examples of the reasons for withdrawal in order to set the context for the quantitative results. For example, we explore specifically what respondents may have meant when they indicated that "inadequate financial aid" was a "major reason" for their absence in the Fall '05 semester. Second, we explore how this situation seemed to relate to discontinued enrollment – in essence, why this situation caused the student to leave the University. Finally, we include respondents' suggestions for what they might have done differently and what UM might have done to help them stay enrolled. At this point, each of the three major themes is explored individually. The complex interrelationships among these multiple categories are explored in a later section of this report.

Financial Themes

The financial issues associated with attending the University of Maryland was one of the major themes emerging from the survey responses. Respondents appeared extremely cognizant of the monetary price they paid to attend UM; financial concerns seemed to weigh heavily on many respondents' minds.

"I think the university is great... but I don't think it is affordable to the average person. My financial issues kept me very stressed and were one of the reasons I couldn't concentrate on my studies. I was constantly trying to come up with ways to pay my tuition."

"I truly believe that the cost of education is way too much. I love Maryland, I love the University, but as an out-of-state student my family is shelling out like \$30,000. I mean that's a lot."

Tuition increases were a recurring theme in this study. Respondents said they were able to attend UM given the cost at the time of their enrollment, but as the price of tuition climbed, it was no longer affordable. A few respondents identified a mid-semester tuition increase specifically as the cause of their discontinued enrollment.

"UMD raised tuition rates dramatically mid-year, particularly for out-of-state students, such as me! ... My family and I agreed that such unannounced, mid-year rate increases dictated that I leave UMD after the 1st semester of my 2nd year."

“Maryland needs to find other ways to get money than raising tuition for those students who are already paying an arm and a leg.”

“I loved UM with all my heart! Growing up it was always my dream to go to school at UM and be a Terp. The two years I spent at UM were two of the best years of my life. Unfortunately, I just could not afford tuition because of its continual increase. If I could afford to, I would re-enroll in a heartbeat!”

Residency status and its relationship to tuition also appeared to be a salient issue for several of the respondents. Most often, when respondents commented on what they perceived to be the high cost of tuition, they referred specifically to the cost for out-of-state students. Financial strain related to tuition seemed to have more of an impact on students legally residing outside the state of Maryland. A group of out-of-state respondents indicated that they left UM to enroll in another institution within their home state because it would be less expensive.

“I was an out-of-state student paying an obscene amount of money to live and pay for school. So unless UMD suddenly decreased the amount that an out-of-state student had to pay, there was really nothing they could have done to keep me enrolled.”

“The only thing I would have done differently is not to have chosen an out-of-state school.”

“I honestly loved being a student at UMD; it was just too expensive for me and that’s why I had to transfer back in-state.”

Several respondents indicated that they faced unexpected difficulty classifying themselves as in-state residents. They perceived themselves as eligible for in-state status, but their documentation was not accepted by the University for one reason or another. Respondents became frustrated with the residency classification procedures, and said they could not afford to remain enrolled at UM as an out-of-state student.

“I have lived in MD for 4 years and after 3 years of paying taxes and registering everything in the state of MD, I was continuously denied in-state tuition.”

“If UMD would have acknowledged my in-state status I would have loved to stay...”

A number of respondents stated that their financial problems resulted from the disparity between UM’s expected family contribution and the actual amount of financial support received for educational expenses from parents or guardians. These respondents said they could not afford to stay at UM given their limited funding.

“When I called financial services for help they said that even though my parents refused to pay for my tuition, their income was high enough and I did not meet requirements for FAFSA...”

A few students indicated that their amount of family support changed suddenly, and that they were unable to persuade UM to reassess their financial aid situation.

“Both of my parents became unemployed in 2003 and I petitioned the university to reconsider my financial aid situation, but got no help. When I applied for financial aid for what would have been my 2nd year, (still had 1 parent unemployed and the other had

taken a job but at less pay) I still didn't get anything other than loans and had to leave and go to work full time."

"[UM could have] offered more financial aid, and support once my grandparents (who were paying for my education) passed..."

A good portion of respondents indicated that inadequate financial aid played a major role in their discontinued enrollment. On the whole, respondents wished that UM was more generous when it came to financial aid packages. One respondent even used the term "stingy" to describe the funding offered by UM. When respondents were asked what UM could have done to help them stay enrolled, offering more financial aid was a popular answer.

Respondents highlighted a variety of options they had turned to, or could have turned to, for educational funding. The sources most commonly cited by the survey respondents included: loans, scholarships, savings, and income. Most of these respondents then went on to discuss the pros and cons associated with each resource.

Several respondents held the perception that UM viewed student loans as the solution to any and all problems with funding. In general, however, respondents felt overwhelmed with the amount of debt they now face as a result of their student loans.

"I don't blame UMD for my 'discontinued enrollment,' I just feel that there is little direction in how to manage your loans. I feel as though UMD, and other colleges, should stop directing people to take out student loans for everything (maybe just the cost of classes) and then help the students find jobs or have cheaper housing so that when they are finished with school they are not drowning in debt."

"I now have \$90,000 in debt that paid for class, books, housing, and the cost of living... because that's what UMD told me to do."

A number of respondents commenting on this topic indicated that they could have applied for more scholarships to offset the cost of tuition. These respondents suggested that a scholarship would have allowed them to remain enrolled at the University. One respondent, for example, left UM because he or she received a full scholarship at another institution. Respondents, on the whole, seemed to strongly prefer financial aid in the form of a grant or scholarship, as opposed to a loan. A few students, however, felt that a scholarship was out of their reach due to poor academic performance.

"[UM could] provide adequate financial aid more in the form of grants and scholarships, rather than loans. Plus loans are not a reasonable form of aid for every family."

A few students mentioned that they "dipped into" – or even emptied – their savings to help fund their UM education. Some wished they had been better about saving money in the years prior to attending college.

"I really loved campus, really loved school and would love to be able to go back. Unfortunately, all my savings and/or funds I had for school are already there."

"I suppose if I had invested my money a bit better in prior years I would've had more in reserve to help pad my costs while I was [at UM]."

A group of respondents stated that they had used, or could have used, their own employment to help finance their education. Other respondents, however, believed that holding a job while attending school would not have been a viable option. A few felt unequipped to juggle both academic and employment demands; another subset felt unable to integrate lab and lecture courses into a work schedule.

"I could've picked up a few jobs while taking classes but that probably would've hurt me academically."

"[If] my course of study had more flexibility in class schedule options where I could work and go to school, I would."

A few students indicated that despite their part-time employment, they were still unable to afford to stay enrolled at UM.

"I was paying for my schooling all by myself and I was only working 20 hrs a week making \$6.00/hr. I just couldn't afford it..."

"[S]chool was too expensive to pay for with a part time job."

Occasionally, respondents classified the cost of living in the area as problematic. They stated that it was difficult to find affordable housing near the University. Several respondents suggested that UM work with the community to provide low-cost housing options for students.

"The best service the school/city could do right now for students is to work to lower the cost of living in downtown College Park."

In general, respondents commenting on their financial concerns wished that the University had provided more assistance and guidance. A few respondents indicated that there was a lack of information on such a vital topic. Others felt that financial options and obligations were not adequately presented or explained to students. A couple of respondents said it was unclear what their financial package would or would not cover, such as housing costs.

"[UM could have] provided more information about the financial obligations or more options to help people afford college."

Personal and Emotional Themes

A variety of personal and emotional problems faced by respondents emerged as another major theme related to discontinued enrollment. Respondents discussed the issues they dealt with outside the classroom and the impact each had on their UM experience. In a fair portion of cases, respondents felt that there was nothing the University could have done to help them stay enrolled. There were a number of personal circumstances, however, in which respondents said the University could have provided some sort of assistance to prevent their stop-out.

"[My discontinued enrollment was] more or less my fault, the University itself wasn't any way involved in my personal problems which lead to my poor academic performance my freshman year."

“[UM could have done] nothing really. Well, okay, maybe giving me a nice scholarship would have helped. Oh, and maybe hooking me up with a sweet off-campus apartment... Seriously though, it was a family illness issue I had to deal with so the school couldn’t have done much to help.”

“The University was helpful with my situation. The health issue within my family was the only reason I was not able to re-enroll.”

A group of respondents stated that an illness or death in the family led to their discontinued enrollment. In many cases, such events appeared to have a compounding emotional, financial, and prioritizing effect on respondents’ lives. Several respondents stated that education could no longer remain their primary focus with a loved-one ill. Others revealed that the death of a family member brought on depression or caused them to lose their focus and motivation. A few students stated that they should have taken time off when a family member passed or became ill; for those who tried to stay enrolled, the secondary effects of the strain, such as low grades, frequently led to their departure.

“There was nothing that I could have done. My mother has cancer and her health has to come first. My education will come as soon as we get over this hurdle.”

“I should have taken the semester off when my family member got sick and passed away. Due to that I lost all motivation to go to class or study.”

Respondents also battled their own physical and mental health problems; such problems often played a large role in their discontinued enrollment. Some respondents said they fell victim to a sudden, unexpected illness or injury, while others continued to battle chronic health problems. A few respondents even indicated that they had to be hospitalized mid-semester. In general, their ailments prevented them from attending class, and they were unable to keep up with their schoolwork. A good portion of these respondents said that they intend to re-enroll when they are physically able.

“I could not help getting very sick – I could not walk and it physically was impossible for me to attend class.”

“I had to put my education on hold so that I could treat my illness.”

A group of respondents discussed their mental well-being specifically and its relationship to their enrollment. Respondents experienced a wide range of mental health issues. Some of these respondents said that they felt homesick and lonely at UM, while others indicated that they suffered from severe depression and anxiety. Most of these students stated that they needed to take time away from their studies and “rebuild” their lives.

“The problems I encountered once I enrolled were ones that were not easily overcome. I did a poor job at engaging faculty and looking for assistance when I needed it. I struggled. . . . in dealing with my issues surrounding depression and anxiety.”

Several respondents mentioned that they experienced difficulty when it came to making friends at UM. Commuters, in particular, appeared to have trouble meeting people; these respondents indicated that they felt disconnected from the University socially. A group of out-of-state respondents said it seemed as if many in-state students already knew each other before attending UM, and that it was difficult to infiltrate these existing social networks. Perceptions of established, impenetrable social networks were occasionally echoed by new freshman and transfers as well. A few respondents said that they could have taken more initiative to join clubs at the University in order to meet new people.

“As an out of state freshman, I was placed in a sophomore dorm which made my transition to the school extremely difficult. It was hard to find a group of friends in an atmosphere where everyone already had their friends. I missed out on the experience of having a freshman floor to bond with.”

“As a highly introverted commuter, it was extremely difficult to make any personal or academic connections whilst on campus. I think that if the University had sponsored a series of regular socials for commuters, my personal issues wouldn’t have escalated to the degree they did.”

Personal problems with roommates also emerged from the responses as a reason for discontinued enrollment. Of the respondents commenting on this topic, most said that living with more than one roommate in a dorm room was a negative experience and hurt them academically. One out-of-state respondent was dissatisfied with the University’s roommate matching service, suggesting that the housing services include a more extensive profile, going beyond a “personal ad,” to help improve students’ experiences with their roommates.

“I would avoid sharing a dorm room with more than one roommate if at all possible, as I believe that was a major part of the reason I was unable to succeed academically.”

“To be completely honest, sharing such small rooms with more than one person was quite detrimental to my academic studies and personal well-being.”

For other respondents, issues with living arrangements manifested not in the form of roommate problems, but as commuting difficulties. These respondents indicated that the drive to and from campus was either too long or too frustrating to be worthwhile. One respondent noted that it was probably not realistic to expect UM to somehow “cure the traffic problem in the area.”

“It was taking me 2 hours in traffic to attend a 45 minute class, and then 2 hours to get to work after that. Forget it. I am taking online courses now with UMUC.”

A group of respondents commented on the problems they faced trying to balance the demands of their personal life with their academic requirements. Holding a job, serving in the military, raising children, and supporting the family household were mentioned as aspects of respondents’ lives in conflict with their educational goals. Several of these respondents suggested that the University was not flexible enough to accommodate their opposing needs. Offering courses online or in the evenings was a common solution put forth by respondents trying to juggle many other responsibilities.

“I think that College Park is a wonderful college with a lot of great resources. I took advantage of them while I was there and was sad to leave them behind. If in the future I continue my higher education and do not have conflicting family and job schedules, I will definitely re-enroll at College Park.”

“I would love to complete my degree as a full-time student, but I am working full-time and do not have the time to give to education right now.”

“The school had great academic standards however did not provide adequate flexibility for students that are working full time, are in the military, or otherwise unable to hold a full time schedule.”

Several female respondents stated that they left UM after becoming pregnant. These women indicated that they did not feel it was possible to stay enrolled while pregnant and/or raising young children. More than one respondent blamed morning sickness for her discontinued enrollment. The majority of these respondents indicated that they hoped to resume their education in the future.

"I'm married, so we had been planning on children for quite a while now. The morning sickness got too out of control and I couldn't stay in class nor prepare for my classes at home. I'm hoping to return to complete my degree at some point."

"I was and still am working full time, raising a daughter and going to school. I did not want to sacrifice my education because I had a child, but I could not sacrifice providing for her for my education."

A small group of respondents left the University of Maryland to pursue other personal goals. A few respondents said they transferred to another institution so they could play on a sports team. One respondent left to serve a religious mission. Another chose to remain overseas after participating in an exchange program to increase his or her foreign language ability.

"The only reason I left UM was to play college basketball. The only thing UM could have done was given me a spot on the basketball team that I would be undeserving of."

Another group of respondents stated that their discontinued enrollment was a result of academic difficulties. Academics for the purposes of this study focused on a respondent's perceived ability or skills. These abilities or skills can either limit a student's ability to attain a degree (maintaining minimum required GPA) or limit opportunities (entry into a limited enrollment program). Those respondents who indicated that academic performance was an issue indicated that the courses were either too difficult or the faculty were not able to teach. A couple of students noted that they performed well, but they didn't meet the minimum requirements for their major of interest.

"It's not what the University should have done. It's what the faculty could've done. Some of my classes were extremely hard. I've taken Chem 2 before and passed it. The teachers make it more difficult than it really has to be. And every assignment in Chemistry shouldn't be on WebCT. How are you supposed to learn?"

"I was unable to make the business school at university of Maryland, which was the reason that forced me to leave. When I applied to the limited enrollment programs the process was with a 3.0 cutoff. However, the school changed the process for the next year where they take in consideration of improvement and extrac[u]ricular activities."

A number of respondents said that it was not a lack of academic ability, but a lack of academic focus which resulted in their discontinued enrollment. A good portion of this group indicated that there were too many distractions at the University, causing them to shift their focus away from their classes and course work. A few respondents indicated that they had their priorities out of order while they attended UM; they placed time with friends or athletics, for example, above their studies.

"I wish that instead of loving the idea that I was finally a UM student that I loved the idea of reading my textbook."

"[I could have] made academics a higher priority over my athletic commitment to the school."

Some respondents stated that their friends at UM were actually a negative influence on their studies. In hindsight, these respondents wished that they had spent their time with more motivated students.

“If I would have gotten out of my shell and surrounded myself with people who were doing well instead of the people who were flunking out, I would have been in much better shape.”

Other respondents indicated that they lacked adequate time management and study skills. They often let procrastination get the better of them. Many of these respondents wished that they had taken advantage of UM’s support services. Several respondents said they should have, or could have, found a tutor or attended learning assistance workshops to improve their academic performance.

“I would have focused more. Not procrastinate on my school work and make a greater attempt to seek help when needed. I had too many distractions causing me not to keep focus. I wasn’t strong/responsible enough to handle it then.”

“I would have managed my time better, and not given up so easily when I fell behind in school work.”

A few respondents stated that they discontinued their enrollment because they lacked direction when it came to their educational and career goals. They believed that they were just wasting time and money as a student at UM because they did not know what they wanted to do with their lives. They indicated that, given the cost of attending UM, it was not sensible to remain enrolled without specific academic goals. Several of these respondents also revealed that they were not motivated to make much of an effort academically without a future goal in mind.

“[I could have] actually had some sort of academic goal BEFORE starting college.”

“[I could have] known what I wanted to do ‘when I grew up’ so I didn’t feel like I was wasting my/my parents’ time/money/energy.”

Also emerging from the survey responses was the finding that some respondents did not feel they were ready to be a UM student; most of these respondents saw leaving the University as a beneficial life experience. Some said they were not prepared at the time to handle the college lifestyle. One respondent said UM “focused on treating students like adults and letting them really get a feel for the real world and being on their own.” Not everyone felt equipped to balance this freedom and responsibility. For some respondents, leaving the University gave them the opportunity to mature and improve skills such as time management. A portion of these respondents have continued their education elsewhere, and say they are now succeeding academically. For a few, being dismissed from the University was the “wake up call” they said they needed.

“I wasn’t ready to be successful in a college environment. After some practical experience in a field related to my major, I have regained the motivation I need to complete my degree.”

“[I] wasn’t all that prepared for college and didn’t take advantage of what UMD had to offer. I’m really glad that I left and I think it was the right decision. It would have been stupid for me to try and push through it like a lot of my friends told me to do.”

“I really loved attending the University of Maryland, but getting kicked out might have been the best thing for me. I took time to improve my study skills, my personality, my health...”

A group of respondents indicated that they were uncomfortable with the campus climate at the University of Maryland. They stated that the environment at the school was not what they expected. Some respondents had expectations of joining a “tight knit” community, but these expectations did not come to fruition. A small number of respondents said the climate was enough of a problem that they felt unwelcome. A couple of respondents were critical of the attitudes and behaviors of the student body, and sometimes athletes in particular, citing ills such as substance abuse and bigotry. On occasion, respondents indicated that they felt the campus was unsafe.

“I think the biggest issue I had with the University and why I didn’t stay was due to just the sheer level of discomfort I felt with College Park. I grew up in a small town, and was not used to life in College Park or at the University and had a lot of trouble getting acclimated to the area and getting comfortable.”

“I feel there are certain ‘types’ of personalities, cultures, appearances that are acceptable at UMCP... ‘Urban’ students, as we are called, who come to UMD from households and neighborhoods that are less fortunate and from less provision tend to stand out... we are not accepted, as if we are unwanted. I feel that [if] there were no legal provision protecting students like myself we would be nonexistent in ‘Terp Life.’”

“I didn’t like the busy atmosphere or the people. Everyone was a bunch of jerks and thought drinking beer was the coolest thing on earth. The place just isn’t my style, I like the small town feel.”

“Promote unity and warmth. UMD feels more like a city within a city. A college is supposed to feel like a united and/or tight-knit community.”

“Remember passing out pins that said “Hate is not a UMD value.”? I’m not sure how true that is, but sometimes I feel apathy and selfishness must be UMD values though. I suggest the University should focus on emphasizing what are UMD values rather than what isn’t.”

Institutional Themes

Respondents also indicated that institutional factors influenced their decision to discontinue their enrollment at the University. Institutional factors highlighted by respondents include: availability of majors at UM, scheduling problems or course availability, policies and procedures, inadequate support services, size, and the quality of instruction.

Though some of these institutional issues are difficult if not impossible to change, respondents indicated that if they had been better educated about the realities of UM, they would have made different decisions. The availability of majors was an issue for some because they were unaware that UM did not offer their intended major, or they came to feel that other institutions were better suited for their academic interests.

“I wish that moving to Baltimore for nursing was more advertised before I made my decision to go to UM. I would have liked to stay at the same college for 4 consecutive years.”

“UMCP should create a better art program. I would go there for anything except art/graphic design.”

“[UM could have done] nothing, they didn't offer my major (Social Work).”

The size of the campus was an issue for some other respondents. These respondents indicated that they just could not handle the realities of interacting in large classes, engaging a large community, or navigating a large campus.

“I don't think the University could have done anything differently or that I could have done anything differently to help me have stayed. I wasn't used to the environment or the size of the school. I really missed my family. Also I felt stuck on campus due to the lack of transportation.”

“Created a more small-school, intellectual environment on the backdrop of a large school...a place where it's cool to be intellectual.”

“I wanted to transfer to a smaller school as an undergraduate. Maryland's huge atmosphere wasn't what I wanted as an undergraduate, and I didn't enjoy living on campus.”

Campus policies were another issue that respondents were not educated about. Again, these respondents indicated that if they were more aware of UM policies they may have had the information to be successful or decided to choose another institution. UM policies mentioned by respondents as ones preventing or prolonging their time to graduation include: transfer policies, access to limited enrollment majors, and other administrative policies.

“I have six years of college and an associate's degree but the credits that U of M offered left me at a freshman/sophomore status. No one was able to help me find a degree program that would help me get my BS in the fewest classes possible.”

“The main reason I left was because of advising problems. Since I had so many credits when I transferred I was not aware that I would have too many credits to have certain majors. I had little to no advising help despite attempts and could not major in what I wanted to major in. No one helped me look at different options.”

Respondents also indicated that there were a number of institutional issues that were unrelated to being knowledgeable of the campus before attending. Some respondents were frustrated with the difficulty in scheduling courses.

“[The] classes should be offered at different times of the day.”

“Give me my \$5,000 back to pay off my loans, because the University did not meet their promised obligations by holding seats open for me in specific classes I needed to complete my degree. I wasted one year of college experience on 24 credits I did not need. Now I owe \$5,000 in school loans for nothing.”

Other respondents were concerned with the perceived lack of student services on campus. Transfer students, for example, noted it was difficult to find housing. A number of other respondents indicated that they left because of negative interaction with advisors, faculty, or other student services staff.

“[UM could have] offered transfer students assistance in finding housing and a roommate(s).”

“The University could have ‘promoted’ their support services a little better like what they did and where they were located.”

“I understand that you can't retake classes . . . but I don't think that if you drop the class it should count against you. I dropped some classes because I have had a lot of people close to me pass away in the past two years and I have also had other family issues and could not make it to the campus. Now I can't finish my degree due to not being able to retake classes. I am smart enough and can pick up on the work easy but it is very difficult when I have been dealing with so much at home.”

Respondents also left because of the perceived lack of quality of instruction. Respondents thought that professors were boring, too difficult, or that they could not understand their instructor or TA because of language issues.

“I did not appreciate getting the dregs of the teaching community as my class professors. I probably would have been much more enthusiastic about my education if, for example, my professor was interesting or at least less monotonous. Or, maybe if my professor in my very first communications class was not a Grad student with oral communication issues, I could have learned a little more about how to give a better oral presentation. Or, maybe if my accounting professor did not throw a hundred years of accounting technique into a single semester, then I could have actually retained something from that horrendous class. If I didn't know better, I would think that my professors' primary concern was the work they were trying to publish rather than little old me.”

Some respondents indicated dealing with multiple institutional problems at once. One respondent, for example, had issues with the social transition/climate on campus as well as the difficulty in courses. Another noted having difficulty with student services staff as well as poor experiences in the classroom. These respondents' experiences were starkly more negative than others and they had developed a laundry list of concerns about their experiences at UM.

“The attitude I became familiar with was one of "sink or swim" if I can't make it here, the college has a long list of those that will replace me. I feel that the college does very little to reach out to new students, particularly those that transfer. The science courses were very difficult and I found very little help available.”

“Overall I felt completely alone at UM. My advisor was a real jerk and every meeting with him was so unhelpful. The professors were TERRIBLE! I had one professor with a serious speech problem! How am I supposed to learn if I have no idea what he is saying? And I think being taught by a 22 year old student aid[e] is not worth the tuition.”

“Well, you could have taken an interest in the fact that your cookie cutter programs weren't for everyone -- Overall, it was a terrible experience, the classes were horrible, the TA's were horrible, and I had a better experience in an online semester I attended with the Art Institute with the minimal interaction they offered than I did at UMD. Not to mention the scheduling and "pre-req" nightmares.”

Conclusion

Some students in this study left the university in crisis or because of academic performance issues. For these students, one issue dictated their departure. Students in crisis often need to remove themselves

from the situation (or be removed via academic dismissal) in order to gain the perspective necessary to change their behaviors for greater academic and personal success. Reflecting this “sadder but wiser” insight, some respondents offered no response to the question, *What might UM have done to help you stay enrolled?* The lack of response in this case was either literal (question left unanswered) or figurative (wrote variations of “not a thing”). These students, however, did respond to the question *What might you have done differently to stay enrolled?* offering reasons such as:

- Too lazy to do my work
- Gone to class
- Studied a lot more
- Taken a year off after graduating from high school, deferring enrollment
- It was better that I took time off to regroup myself

On the other hand, those who responded to *What might UM have done to help you stay enrolled?* but had no answer to the question *What might you have done differently to stay enrolled?* indicated that they needed to leave UM and planned to transfer to a place that would better respond to their needs and/or academic goals. Responses from these students, noting what UM might have done, included:

- Increased financial aid offering
- Have more services to help out-of-state or international students
- Promote unity and warmth
- Offer my major
- Classes should be offered at different times of the day
- Offered transfer students assistance in finding housing and a roommate.

Though only one issue may influence the departure of some students in this study, many others left the University under less clear circumstances. Rather than a single event or reason dictating the withdrawal, a confluence of reasons – “major” and/or “minor” – occurs to make further attendance untenable, at least in the short-term. While individual factors such as inadequate advising or teaching, the stress of commuting, finances, loneliness, homesickness, and roommate conflicts may not, in and of themselves, be sufficient to convince someone to leave, their synergy can overwhelm a student, especially one whose coping resources may be compromised or reduced.

**83% of respondents indicated major or minor reasons in 2 or more categories;
58% indicated major or minor reasons in 4 or more categories.**

It’s important to note that while the University has some measure of control over some of these issues (e.g., advising, teaching, resource information dissemination), many of the conditions leading to withdrawal are beyond the University’s reach. It would be wise for the University to focus on improving what it can, and realize that it cannot, and should not, act to keep all students from withdrawing. In some cases, leaving the University at that time is truly in the best interest of the student. Future study will focus on whether some indicators can determine if a student will leave, so University staff may plan an intervention.

This questionnaire will continue to be offered to degree-seeking students who discontinue their enrollment at UM.

Limitations of the Report

Caution should be used when interpreting the results of this report. Because of the extremely low response rate, we were unable to conduct quantitative analyses necessary to fully understand retention issues across all students who leave the university. We therefore elected to learn from the qualitative information within the survey. The qualitative responses provided us with rich information about the circumstances of withdrawal and allowed us to understand that leaving the university is a unique experience. It has also allowed us to identify issues that lead to student departure. This report should be used in such a way as to be aware of the patterns found in this report (i.e. a student dealing with multiple issues at once, a student in crises, or a student in academic difficulty) and to assess a student's needs on an individual basis.

While not all the data may be relevant to your unit or department, we encourage you to use those elements that are. Some suggestions for use of the data include:

- Review and discuss findings with colleagues. Share this report with others in your college, department or office in order to inform them of current findings about the experiences of UM students who participated in this study. Discuss how these findings confirm or refute your perceptions of the undergraduate student experience.
- Clarify the data with focus groups. Engage students in small discussion groups to gain further information about topics of interest to your department.
- Allow data to help inform budget expenditures or cutbacks. Data can be used to help guide decisions about how to prioritize use of funds to meet students' needs and concerns.
- Determine areas for further analysis. CAWG can assist departments, units, and colleges by providing data or conducting relevant subgroup analyses.

Appendix A: University of Maryland “My Story” Survey

My Story Questionnaire

According to University of Maryland records, you had been an undergraduate student at UM, but you were not enrolled as an undergraduate throughout the Fall 2005 semester.

Is this correct?

- Yes (Please proceed with the survey)
- No, I was enrolled as an undergraduate at UM throughout Fall 2005
- No, I received a Bachelor’s degree from UM before Fall 2005

There are many reasons why students decide to discontinue their undergraduate enrollment in college, either temporarily or not. Please indicate the degree to which each of the following was a reason for your absence.

Not a reason Minor Major

- Transportation/commute issues
 - Cost of commute
 - Commute took too long
 - Lack of convenient transportation
 - Cost of on-campus parking
 - Loss of usual method of transportation
 - Moved from the area
 - Other transportation issue: _____
- Employment issues
 - Could not find work on campus
 - Class/work schedules were in conflict
 - Had trouble balancing work and school
 - Employer no longer supported educational goals
 - Wanted to gain practical experience
 - Accepted a full-time job
 - Military service
 - Other employment issue: _____
- Financial issues
 - Encountered unexpected expenses
 - Cost of tuition and fees too high
 - Cost of books and supplies too high
 - Cost of living in area too high
 - Inadequate financial aid
 - Didn’t know how to obtain financial aid
 - Had to help support family
 - Change in parental financial support
 - Had to take a job off campus
 - Other financial issue: _____

- Academic issues
 - Couldn't get into a Limited Enrollment Program
 - UM didn't have program/ major
 - Classes were too difficult
 - Classes weren't challenging
 - Under-prepared academically
 - Anticipated or actual grades
 - Didn't have good study habits
 - Couldn't successfully complete specific required course(s)
 - Needed class(es) were full
 - Class schedule conflict
 - Dissatisfied with the quality of instruction
 - Not enough interaction/attention from faculty
 - Too many people in the classes
 - Academic services/advising not helpful
 - Didn't know where to go for academic/advising assistance
 - Other academic issue: _____
- Family issues
 - Illness in family
 - Death of family member
 - Had trouble balancing school and family obligations
 - Family no longer supported academic goals
 - Change in parental marital status
 - Wanted to live closer to family or loved ones
 - Child care difficulties
 - Other family issue: _____
- Personal issues
 - Illness or health issues
 - Lack of focus or direction
 - Loss of motivation
 - Felt lonely
 - Homesick
 - Felt burnt out/needed a break from studies
 - Depression and/or anxiety
 - Missed boyfriend/girlfriend
 - Change in relationship status
 - Drug or alcohol issues
 - Campus support services were not helpful
 - Didn't know where to go for campus support
 - Citizenship/visa issues
 - Legal issues
 - Other personal issue: _____
- Campus climate issues
 - Campus is too spread out
 - Uncomfortable with the number of students
 - Safety issues on and/or around campus
 - Drug or alcohol abuse on campus
 - Felt like an outsider
 - Other campus climate issue: _____

- Housing issues
 - Couldn't get on-campus housing
 - Couldn't find housing off-campus
 - Poor quality of housing given cost
 - Couldn't afford on-campus housing
 - Couldn't afford convenient off-campus housing
 - Couldn't afford campus meal plan
 - Problems with roommate(s)
 - Other housing issue: _____

Do you plan to re-enroll at the University of Maryland at some point?

- I am currently enrolled at UM
- Yes, I plan to re-enroll at UM
- No, I plan to enroll elsewhere or have enrolled elsewhere
- No, I do not plan to enroll at UM or another college or university

If you are not currently enrolled at UM, what would you say was the **primary** reason for not re-enrolling?

- I am currently enrolled at UM
- Transferred to another college or university
- Didn't get re-admitted
- Campus climate issues
- Housing/living arrangement issues
- Transportation/commute issues
- Employment issues
- Financial issues
- Family issues
- Academic issues
- Personal issues
- Other: _____

What might the University have done to help you stay enrolled? _____

What might you have done differently to stay enrolled? _____

Other comments about your discontinued enrollment at the University of Maryland:

Appendix B: Correspondence to Students

Postcard correspondence

 <p>UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Your voice counts!</i></p> <p>There are many reasons why students discontinue their undergraduate enrollment in college, either temporarily or not. The Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) is conducting a brief web survey in order to better understand what can help students to stay – or return – and graduate. We want to hear your story.</p> <p>If you participate, you may enter a drawing for one of</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TWENTY \$50 gift certificates to either Target or Best Buy.</p> <p>To participate, visit the following website and log in using your last name and birth date: www.umd.edu/MyStory</p> <p>You will get a reminder email about this survey in the next few days!</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"><tr><td style="width: 50%;">Questions? Call or write us at: cawg@umd.edu 301.405.5590</td><td style="width: 50%;">Please forward if recipient has moved to another address.</td></tr></table>	Questions? Call or write us at: cawg@umd.edu 301.405.5590	Please forward if recipient has moved to another address.
Questions? Call or write us at: cawg@umd.edu 301.405.5590	Please forward if recipient has moved to another address.		

Email correspondence

** Bounces and “Reply to” go to cawg@umd.edu **

SUBJECT LINE: Provide UM feedback: We want to hear your story

According to University of Maryland records, you had been an undergraduate student at UM, but you were not enrolled as an undergraduate throughout the Fall 2005 semester. There are many reasons why students decide to discontinue their undergraduate enrollment in college, either temporarily or not. The Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) is conducting a brief web survey in order to better understand what can help students to stay – or return – and graduate. We want to hear your story.

If you participate, you may enter a drawing for one of TWENTY \$50 gift certificates to either Target or Best Buy.

If you choose to participate in this survey, all of your responses will be kept strictly confidential; your name will not be identified at any time. Please take a moment right now to participate. The survey takes approximately **5 minutes** to complete.

Click on this link to enter the study website:

www.umd.edu/MyStory

Enter your last name and birth date to log in.

If you have questions about the survey, please contact Sharon La Voy, Associate Director in the Office of Institutional Research and Planning at 301.405.5590 or cawg@umd.edu.

Sincerely,

Dr. Robert Waters Jr.
Associate Vice President & Special Assistant to the President
University of Maryland

Opt-out Option: If you do not wish to participate in this study or receive further reminders, please respond to this e-mail with “unsubscribe” in the subject line and you will be removed from our distribution list.

Automated telephone message

Hello! I am <name> from the University of Maryland. The University is conducting a brief web survey at www.umd.edu/MyStory in order to better understand what can help students to stay – or return – and graduate. We want to hear your story. Hopefully you have received notices in the mail and on e-mail inviting you to take the survey. I would like to assure you that we really care about your responses, and any information you can give us will be helpful. For your trouble, if you participate you can enter a raffle to win one of twenty \$50 gift certificates to either Target or Best Buy. Once more, the website is www.umd.edu/MyStory. Thank you!

Appendix C: Campus Assessment Working Group

The Campus Assessment Working Group (CAWG) was created in 1996 and is currently chaired by Robert E. Waters, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and Special Assistant to the President. CAWG is dedicated to building a culture of evidence at the University of Maryland. One way of accomplishing this task is by administering large-scale surveys to cross-sections of undergraduates on a regular basis, thereby gathering evidence regarding the student experience from multiple perspectives. CAWG presently consists of four subgroups covering various aspects of the student experience.

More information about CAWG is available on the website: www.umd.edu/cawg or from

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