Exploring a New Dimension of College Student Retention: Undergraduate Leaves of Absence

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While issues of undergraduate retention have gained significant attention in recent years, little has yet been devoted to the study of college students who take a Leave of Absence (excused withdrawal from the semester) with the intention to return. Through document analysis of student academic files at a large, private, urban university from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, this paper explores undergraduate Leaves of Absence (LOAs) as a new dimension in student retention and promotes the importance of holistically supporting students both prior to their LOAs and upon their reintegration into the college.

According to a 2006 national report published by the U.S. Department of Education, over two million students enter their first year of college annually; however, an alarming 45% of all undergraduates drop out each year, failing to complete their degrees (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1982). As a result, researchers, policy-makers, and student affairs practitioners have become increasingly interested in developing retention strategies and support services to help maintain students’ academic enrollment. One approach, often found at large or competitive institutions, is a policy allowing students to take a Leave of Absence (LOA), defined as an excused withdrawal from a semester for up to one academic year due to extenuating circumstances. A random search of American postsecondary institutions revealed that policies for undergraduate LOAs vary widely from school to school, and, in many large institutions, the guidelines and procedures are separate and independently structured for each college within a given university. This stratification of governance and policies regarding LOAs complicates the system and makes it more difficult for students to directly connect with necessary services and supports. As a result, students who are unaware of or do not have access to this alternative route for completing their degree may be more likely to deal with external interferences by dropping out of college.

Existing Research on Undergraduate Leaves of Absence

While Tinto’s 1975 report on college student retention has inspired numerous researchers to consider how academic and social integration into college affect a student’s likelihood to graduate, several criticisms have challenged the adequa-
cy and reproached the non-generalizability of his “student integration model.” Similarly, although a great deal of the literature has analyzed the ways in which an individual’s college preparedness and compatibility with the institution contribute to undergraduate attrition, none have yet considered how an LOA factors into the retention equation and how it affects academic success and overall graduation rates.

In examining the large-scale effects LOAs have on institutional retention rates, it is also necessary to consider how this policy impacts individual success for students at risk of dropping out before completing their degree. Both Hoffman, Ganz, and Dorosin (1974) and Meilman, Manley, Gaylor, and Turco (1992) found that the majority of students who have gone on LOAs have considered their time away to have been beneficial, as a considerable number of “grade point average[s] improved significantly after return from the withdrawal, with a large jump in individual term averages occurring between the terms immediately preceding and immediately following return” (Meilman et al., p. 217). However, these 1974 and 1992 studies focused on students whose LOAs were specifically mental health related and did not consider students who take LOAs for personal or financial reasons. Therefore, while such research certainly paved the way for future studies on undergraduate LOAs, it failed to address the issue of college student retention for all at-risk students and the relationship between this policy and practice.

Research Questions & Method

In response to this apparent lack of current knowledge regarding students who take LOAs, a study was conducted in 2006 to gauge why these students are taking LOAs today and how student affairs professionals might enhance support services so common needs may be addressed proactively. The study was conducted at a liberal arts college (6,500 undergraduates) housed within a large, private, urban university, using data recorded in the College’s official Leave of Absence database from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006. Through this document analysis, the study explored the reasons why students take LOAs, examined the distribution of LOAs for males versus females at the College, recorded the rate at which these LOAs were extended to the full year, and tracked continuing trends as predictors for the future.

Leave of Absence Policy and Procedure

Guidelines for the College’s official LOA policy are listed in the Academic Policies section of the school’s academic bulletin, which can be accessed electronically through the College website. In very brief terms the policy currently states, “students who wish to be out of attendance from the College for one semester or an academic year may be granted an official Leave of Absence” (2004, p. 238). In order to be granted an LOA, students are required to meet with an academic advisor to discuss their reasons for leaving, as well as the effects it will have on the future of their academic career. While undergraduates must petition for an LOA through this formal process, the mandatory one-on-one academic advising
meeting most often results in advisor approval.

Limitations

When students request an LOA, their reason for leaving is determined and recorded as either Personal/Financial, Counseling, Medical (physical), Academic Probation, or Non-University (Non-U) Study Abroad/Travel in the official LOA database. Due to this pre-designation of categories, the causes of LOAs could not be redefined, specified, or sub-categorized within more descriptive groupings. Moreover, while this study only offers trends and statistics for students within one specific college, it is this researcher’s hope that other institutions and practitioners may find the assessment to be a meaningful evaluation and representation of many undergraduate students who take LOAs. Due to the sensitivity of situations surrounding students’ reasons for taking LOAs, this assessment was limited to a document analysis, with no opportunity to gain further insight from the students themselves.

Data Analysis

What is the distribution of students’ reasons for taking an LOA?

Document analysis of the LOA database revealed Personal/Financial LOAs to be significantly and consistently the most common reason cited each semester and throughout the five years studied. In fact, of the 960 total undergraduate LOAs taken from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, 592 LOAs were attributed to Personal/Financial reasons. This means 61.7% of the total LOAs fall into a category that is least descriptive, limiting the potential for an insightful conclusion based on this portion of the data. Non-U Study Abroad/Travel (students who traveled or studied internationally independent of the College’s formal study abroad programs) accounted for the second-highest total of 190 students (19.8%). Counseling-related reasons were cited by 107 students (11.1%), while 57 students (5.9%) took Medical (physical) LOAs. Finally, Academic Probation was the least common reason for taking an LOA, with just 14 students (1.5%). Figure 1 illustrates these trends in LOAs over the five years studied.

Figure 1:

Types of LOAs cited and recorded over 5 years (Fall 2001 - Spring 2006).
From which causes for taking an LOA are students most likely to take Extensions?

When an academic advisor at the College approves an LOA petition, the student is granted one excused semester. However, if more time off is necessary, the student may petition for an Extension of the LOA, which would permit them to stay out another semester (students are allowed a maximum of two semesters of LOAs over the course of their academic careers). As with the petitions for LOAs, petitions for an Extension of LOAs are usually granted. Any additional time off beyond these two semesters requires the student to withdraw from the College completely and formally reapply prior to their anticipated return. According to the data, 10% of the total LOAs recorded from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006 were extended. While most were Extensions of Personal/Financial LOAs, the percentages shown in Table 1 illustrate that students on Academic Probation and Medical (physical) LOAs were actually more likely to extend their time away.

Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize the disparity between the number of Extensions of LOAs taken in the Spring, as compared to the Fall semesters. Figure 2 expresses this with four distinct peaks during the Spring, and drastic dips in the number of Extensions granted in Fall 2002, Fall 2003, and Fall 2005. Overall, petitions for Extensions seem to be following a declining trend, as a mere 8 students extended their LOAs in Spring 2006 as opposed to the 20 students who extended their LOAs in Spring 2002.
What are the gender distinctions (if any) between students taking LOAs?

Of the nearly 6,500 undergraduates enrolled in the College each academic year from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, the average gender division of roughly 39.5% male to 60.5% female remained consistent (Fact Book, 2004). Fascinatingly, the percentage ratio of male and female students taking LOAs each year is fairly representative of this average school-wide gender division. In fact, the gender ratios between males and females within each specific category of LOAs were also proportionately distributed. From Fall 2001 to Spring 2006, nearly twice as many females were represented in each category of LOAs as compared to the number of males. The male-to-female ratio for students taking Extensions on their LOAs was also representative of the overall distribution, with males representing just 34% (37 students) extending their LOAs, as compared to the 66% (71) females who were approved for the maximum of one year away.

What are the five-year trends for students taking LOAs?

A comparison of LOAs taken during the Fall 2001/Spring 2002 academic year as compared to the Fall 2005/Spring 2006 semesters, shows an overall 37.1% decrease in the total number of students on LOAs. On a smaller scale, Table 2 illustrates a steady and consistent .4% (± 0.1) decrease in the percentage of students taking LOAs during each of the five academic years measured.

![Table 2: 5-year Leave of Absence Trends (Fall 2001/Spring 2002 – Fall 2005/Spring 2006)](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Total Leaves</th>
<th>Percent of Undergraduate Class Taking Leaves</th>
<th>Change in Percentage from Previous Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2001–Spring 2002</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>4.10%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2002–Spring 2003</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>3.60%</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2003–Spring 2004</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>3.40%</td>
<td>-0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2004–Spring 2005</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>2.90%</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2005–Spring 2006</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>2.80%</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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In assessing the five-year trends in the types of LOAs taken each semester from Fall 2001 to Spring 2006 (Figure 1), it becomes clear that more students take Counseling Leaves, Non-U Study Abroad/Travel Leaves, and Extensions of LOAs during the Spring semester, while, for unknown reasons, Personal/Financial Leaves are most often taken in the Fall. Furthermore, while the total number of students taking LOAs each year and within each category has been on a steady decline since Fall 2001, Figure 1 illustrates a positive trend in the number of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel Leaves taken over the five academic years measured. In fact, from Fall 2005 to Spring 2006 alone, there was a significant leap in the number of students traveling internationally through out-
side officially sanctioned study abroad programs (at branch campuses abroad and official exchange programs). While the five-year trends suggest the numbers will dip again in Fall 2006, the overall data implies the total number of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel LOAs will continue on this upward climb.

Implications for Practice: Making Sense of the Data

*Personal/Financial causes are consistently the most prevalent reason for taking an LOA* With such a high number of LOAs being filed as Personal/Financial, it has become extremely difficult to track and understand how the institution can best support and address the needs of these students. Despite the existence of university-wide outreach and support programs, it is challenging to reach out to students whose needs are cloaked under such generalizations. Thus, it is essential that students’ reasons for taking a Personal LOA be more specifically identified and measured. Such efforts would provide student affairs practitioners, faculty, and administrators with more information about how best to support today’s college students. With this insight, universities can more effectively serve a constituency that may have been too long overlooked. In other words, though it is important to respect the privacy of students by not insisting they disclose the details of the difficulties or circumstances imposing the need for them to take time off, student affairs practitioners and administrators cannot expect to fully meet the needs of students if left uninformed of their true concerns.

*Twice as many females as males represent the total number of students taking LOAs each year.*

Because the College’s undergraduate class has consistently enrolled about twice as many females as males each year, it is difficult to decipher whether the proportion of males to females taking undergraduate LOAs is merely representative of the larger student population, or whether female students are actually more likely to take Leaves of Absence than their male counterparts.

*Students on Medical (physical) or Academic Probation LOAs are most likely to take Extensions.*

While Personal/Financial reasons are consistently the most common justifications for LOAs, it is interesting to note that only 13% of students within that category extend the LOA to the maximum of two semesters. On the other hand, Medical (physical) and Academic Probation LOAs, which are least cited each term, represent the categories with the largest proportion of students who request Extensions. While Extensions of Medical (physical) LOAs are fairly self-explanatory and usually out of the hands of the university, it is somewhat disconcerting to see 21.4% of those on Academic Probation LOAs extend their time away to an entire year.

These results suggest that students on Academic Probation require enhanced support and communication from academic advisors and administrators while on their LOAs. It may even be in the students’ best interest for the academic advisor to implement a formal or informal plan of action for the student to follow.
during their time away. Encouraging students to speak with an academic advisor about the goals of their LOAs and about a plan of objectives to achieve while away may help ensure that all LOAs, in all categories, are supportive of and not detrimental to students’ personal well-being and academic success upon return.

The total number of students taking LOAs has steadily decreased each year and within each category since Fall 2001—with the exception of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel.

With more students traveling internationally and studying abroad outside of University-established programs each year, it is important to ensure that the resources to support this growing interest are available and easily accessible to all college students. With one of the largest and most renowned international study abroad programs, this University sends over 2,000 students to eight University-sponsored abroad sites each year. Therefore, this increase in the number of Non-U Study Abroad/Travel LOAs is not decreasing the number of students traveling to University-sponsored programs, but rather, is enhancing and broadening international study opportunities for a greater number of students. In an effort to most effectively serve these students, it is important that academic advisors be trained in how to best work with and provide resources for students interested in study abroad programs not offered by the university.

This phenomenon of increased Non-U Study Abroad/Travel may also explain much of the reason why slightly more students take their LOAs in the Spring as opposed to the Fall, since a Spring LOA allows an additional unofficial “extension” through the summer. Also, with a significant number of students on LOAs during each semester, it is crucial that academic departments offer their required courses in both the Fall and the Spring to ensure students taking an LOA do not have difficulty advancing toward their degree within prospective major fields.

Future Research

The results of this assessment on undergraduate LOAs have uncovered the depth and breadth of this topic while revealing the importance of pursuing more extensive research in order to answer questions surrounding the relationship between undergraduate LOAs and the compelling issue of college student retention. In an effort to address this timely problem and expand upon the limited research currently available on undergraduate LOAs, it is the researcher’s intention to use these findings as a foundation upon which further research can be conducted and informed.

In an effort to create a more accurate profile of the broad and non-descriptive Personal/Financial LOA category, future studies should consider the ways in which demographic characteristics, such as students’ class year, major, enrollment status (transfer/full-time/part-time), ethnicity, and hometown region correlate with the rate of return from, and degree completion for, students who take an LOA. In addition, it would be meaningful to address whether these temporary withdrawals are met with outcomes of success (e.g., long-term retention and graduation), while determining the relationship between undergraduate LOAs and overall institutional and national retention rates.
Conclusion

While the implications reached through this extensive document analysis offer new insight and inspire opportunity for practical implementation, a great deal remains unknown regarding why students take LOAs and the impact LOAs have on college student retention and academic success. Nevertheless, these current and future findings can aid faculty and student affairs practitioners in gaining a more complex understanding of undergraduate needs, while helping empower policy-makers and administrators to enhance the visibility of and access to this temporary withdrawal option as an effective retention tool for students at-risk. By engaging in an exploration of this new dimension of college student retention, universities nationwide may gain further insight into the changing needs of today’s college students, and in doing so, can ensure that university services holistically support these students throughout the entire LOA process.
References


