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## **An investigation of the Major Causes of Student Attrition in St. Mary's University College**

Kassahun Habtamu  
St. Mary's University College

### ***Abstract***

*The purpose of this study is to investigate the major causes of student attrition (withdrawal, dismissal, and dropping out) in St. Mary's University College. Data was gathered from students, the registrar office head, the student affairs office head as well as the guidance and counseling worker through interviews and questionnaires. Relevant documents were also consulted from the registrar's office. The data collected was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Analysis of the data revealed that factors such as financial problems, academic failure, lack of study and note taking skills, lack of guidance and counseling services, grading system, frequent absenteeism from classes, large class size, unstable working conditions of employee students were responsible for students discontinuation of college education.*

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### **1. Introduction**

Wastage in education in the forms of repetition, dropping out, dismissal, withdrawal etc., is a major problem of the education sector in developing countries like Ethiopia (Habtamu, 2002). High levels of attrition adversely affect an institution's funding, facilities and long-term planning. Hence, academic institutions are concerned with the withdrawal of students and would like to reduce the percentage who withdraws from their institution (Simpson, 2004).

Wastage in education includes missed opportunities for individuals, families and societies drop out, repetition, failure, brain drain, unemployment of graduates and attrition (Shiundu as cited in Habtamu, 2002). However, in this paper the concern will be on student attrition

(a gradual reduction in the number of students enrolled due to drop out, dismissal, withdrawal, and repetition).

According to Asmerom, *et al* (1989), the magnitude of attrition has become a cause for great concern, particularly in institutions of higher learning in Ethiopia. These authors argued that the country could hardly afford to waste such a productive labor force.

Supporting this idea, Simpson (2004) said that not only is recruitment extremely important but also the students retention is a mark of a quality education.

With regard to retention as a mark of quality education, Hirsch and Benjamin (2006) argued that high drop out is one indicator of teaching quality. Student retention should be the central component of any effort to measure the quality of an institution or program. Excellence and quality should be determined by the degree to which an institution develops students' abilities to complete their education.

Yalew (2003) on his part said that the quality of education is partly determined by the success of students in the learning process. In higher learning institutions, there are a number of factors that affect the academic performance of students (Yalew, 2003). Personal factors such as motivation, interest, attitude, cognitive styles, and attribution styles affect learning strategies. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are also found to be important predictors of academic performance. Environmental attributes like climatic condition of the area, the learning atmosphere, social interactions among students and teachers account for variation in academic achievement among students. Moreover, the nature of the curriculum, the contents of subject matter to be learned, availability of learning materials and facilities, the administrative nature of the institution, access of students to relevant information are also important factors for their success.

Research work in the area, indicated that a large number of factors are responsible for students' discontinuation of education from higher learning institutions. Kelly as cited in Yalew (2003) classified the causes of student attrition in to two broad categories (psychological and socio-economic factors). The first include factors such as student behavior, performance in school, psychological states, and the students' family background. The second category of causes of attrition emphasizes unequal economic status among students to support themselves as well as the political and social structure and certain practices of the school.

Many researchers, however, found that academic performance is the most important factor for students' dismissal, withdrawal and dropout (Laekemariam, 1994; Hadre and Reeve, 2003; Asmerom, et al, 1989; Parkay and Stanford, 2004; Sadker and Sadker, 1997).

Lackemariam (1994) argued that students were dismissed, withdrawn or dropped out their college mainly due to low academic competence. Parkay and Standford (2004) have also said that students at risk of dropping out tend to get low grades, academically perform below grade level and have behavior problems in school. Hadre and Reeve (2003) on their part found that poor academic achievement is an especially strong predictor of dropout intentions, Poor academic performance for casts helps shape students intensions to drop out of school.

According to Asmerom, et al (1989) the causes of dropout are both academic and non-academic. However, the majority of students in institutions of higher learning in Ethiopia is dismissed largely for academic reasons and depends on performance.

Other researchers attributed the causes of student attrition mainly to administrative conditions and planning of the institution. Gebresellassie (1998) as cited in Yalew (2003) attributed the causes of attrition to poor administrative and educational services provided in higher learning institutions. Supporting this argument Husain (1987) as cited in Yalew

(2003) reported that the causes of student attrition at universities and colleges can be attributed to educational planning that gave little chance to students to get better jobs and varied educational opportunities.

Temesgen (1991) suggested that the family background of students and curriculum incompatibilities of secondary and tertiary education levels forced many students to quit their education or to be dismissed. In support of this Sadker and Sadker (1997) wrote students without a support structure at home face disadvantage at school. Students are more likely to drop out if they are members of large families and if their parents are poorly educated or working in low payed jobs. Students from low income, low skill and low education family backgrounds are several times more likely to drop out of school than are students from wealthy families. Hersh and Benjamin (2006) also have said that researchers confirmed the importance of high school curriculum for college persistence and retention. Other researchers found that financial matters contribute considerably to students discontinuation of college education (Hersh and Benjamin, 2006; Habtamu, 2002; Sadker and Sadker, 1997)

Yalew (2003) argued that although academic achievement is found to be the most determining factor for students' retention, it is in turn affected by many other variables. Academic failure by itself should not be considered as a cause for student attrition, rather it is a manifestation of the existence of other variables that affect students in academic settings.

Yalew (2003) further stated that researches have confirmed the role of institutional, personal, and environmental variables in shaping both attitudes and intents to persist or dropout. Cabrera, Nova and Castaneda as cited in Yalew (2003) in support of the above stated that attrition is mainly the result of adjustment problems and self-conceptions rather than low level of academic competence.

Those who verified the importance of adjustment problems for attrition argue that since students in college environments are subject to continuous evaluation and assessment and are usually bombarded with several academic and non-academic appraisals, they often experience adjustment problems which manifest in the form of frustration, anxiety, and emotional instability. Compared to high school, the college environment is characterized by homogeneous ability groups, highly competitive situations, strict grading systems, poor teacher-student relationships and the need to make important decisions on the part of the individual student. Such conditions induce anxiety, a sense of incapability, and feelings of inferiority.

According to social cognitive psychologists, no matter how frustrating and demanding a college environment may be, the level of self-efficacy individuals possess plays a significant role in facilitating their adjustment to the environment (Yalew, 2003).

In summary, Asmerom, *et al*, (1989) found that though academic performance is the major reason of attrition, they also found the following non-academic reasons.

- Inadequate facilities and services in the institutions;
- Lack of guidance and counseling;
- Inadequate background of students and their preparation before joining higher learning institutions;
- Inadequate qualification and competence among instructors;
- Poor social and recreational outlets for students;
- Absence of clear and uniform policy on student allocation to various institutions and departments; and
- Lack of adequate and standardized examination system policies.

Yalew (2003) summarized his findings on causes of attrition as follows.

- Exaggerated anxiety about performance and with students interaction and learning tasks;

- Health problems;
- Social and environmental adjustment problems;
- Very low perception of one's ability;
- Lack of competence to deal with educational careers;
- Falling in love;
- Placed in a department or college which was not the student's choice;
- Lack of appropriate study skills;
- Inadequate availability of reference materials;
- Uncomfortable and crowded library;
- Curriculum incompatibilities of secondary and tertiary levels;
- Different teaching style of high school and college teachers;
- Difficulty to take notes during lecture and from textbooks;
- Distorted information provided from seniors to freshman students.

The major purpose of this study is, therefore, to investigate the causes of student attrition (drop out, withdrawal, dismissal, repetition etc) from private higher learning institutions with particular reference to St. Mary's University College. To this end, the following research questions were formulated.

- What is the general state of student attrition in St. Mary's University College?
- What are the major causes of student attrition in St. Mary's University College?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants and sampling procedure**

In line with the objective of the study, students, the registrar office head, students' affairs head and the counselor of the university college participated in the study. Of all students who are attending in the regular programs (extension and day-time), 215 were randomly selected. Proportional numbers of students from the degree program, teacher education

program and TVET program were selected for the study. Hence, simple random and stratified random sampling techniques were employed in the study.

## **2.2. Instruments**

Different data gathering instruments were used in the study (questionnaire, interview and document analysis). The questionnaire was administered to students and consisted of two sets of items. The first set comprised five items which asked respondents about their personal characteristics such as sex, faculty, whether or not they plan to discontinue their education and whether the student is parttime or full time.

The second set consisted of 21 items. These items present possible causes of student attrition from higher learning institutions and respondents were asked to rate the importance of each cause on a five point scale (very important, moderately important, less important and not important).

In-depth interviews were conducted with the registrar office head, students' affairs office head and the counselor of the university college independently. The interviews were based on issues related to the conditions and trend of attrition in the University College and major causes that force students to discontinue their education from the university college. Moreover, documents were consulted from the registrar's office to retrieve information about the condition, rate and pattern of attrition in the university college.

## **2.3. Methods of data analysis**

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed to analyze the collected data. Data gathered through interviews and documents were analyzed qualitatively. Descriptive statistics like tables, frequency distributions, percentages, mean and standard deviations were used to analyze the quantitative data gathered through the questionnaire.



### 3. Results and Discussion

#### A. Analysis of data collected from documents

Information about the general pattern or condition of student attrition in St. Mary's University College, documents was consulted from the registrar office.

**Table 1: Total number of withdrawals and dropouts (1993 E.C to1998 E.C)**

Year of entry	Department	Number of withdrawals and dropouts
1993 E.C	Accounting	32
	Marketing Management	0
	SSOM	13
	<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>
1994 E.C	Accounting	40
	Marketing Management	19
	Law	10
	SSOM	5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>
1995 E.C.	Accounting	35
	Marketing Management	32
	Law	2
	SSOM	8
	Computer Science	12
	<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>
1996 E.C.	Accounting	111
	Marketing Management	94
	Law	48
	SSOM	109
	Computer Science	61
	<b>Total</b>	<b>423</b>
1997 E.C	Accounting	95
	Marketing Management	76
	Law	71
	Computer Science	51
	SSOM	21
	Geography	0
	English	4
	Mathematics	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>319</b>
1998 E.C	Accounting	133
	Marketing Management	71
	Law	30
	Computer Science	44
	SSOM	11
	Social Science	6
	Languages	32
	<b>Total</b>	<b>327</b>

**Source:** Bulletin of student statistics, St. Mary's University College

The above table generally shows that there is dropout and withdrawal from different departments every year. In this regard the trend of attrition seems to increase from year to year.

**Table 2: Admitted to graduated rate (1991 E.C. to 1996 E.C)**

Year of entry	Admitted	Graduated	Attrition rate in %
1991/1992	199	154	22.61
1992/1993	316	242	23.42
1993/1994	597	508	14.91
1994/1995	2133	1710	19.83
1995	1217	898	26.21
1996	1068	741	30.62
<b>Total</b>	<b>5530</b>	<b>4253</b>	<b>23.09</b>

**Source:** Bulletin of student statistics, St. Mary's University College

As it is shown in the table above, admission to graduation (retention rate) is low (less than 80%). Average attrition from 1991 to 1996 E.C is 23.09 and is increasing from year to year.

Complete information about dropouts and withdrawals of the 1999 E.C academic year was not obtained. However, the academic dean office dispatched a letter showing number of dropouts and withdrawals (from September to March) from different departments and is presented as follows.

**Table 3: Number of withdrawals and dropouts (September to March, 2007)**

Department	Number of withdrawals and dropouts
Accounting	128
Computer Science	59
Law	50
Management	58
Marketing Management	57
SSOM	13
Education	2
Languages	9
Natural Sciences	5
Social Science	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>384</b>

### **Analysis of data collected through interviews**

Interviews were conducted with relevant informants for the study (registrar office head, students affairs office head and the guidance and counseling worker). The interviews focused on three major issues.

What is the general pattern or condition of attrition in St. Mary's University College?

What are the major causes of attrition?

What should be done to reduce attrition?

With regard to the first question (general pattern of attrition), the registrar head said that attrition rate is increasing with the increase of admission. However, he believed that with the increase in the admission, attrition is not really a serious problem in the university college.

The student affairs head as well as the guidance and counseling worker have a little different view with regard to the pattern of attrition in the university college. They have said that so many students are discontinuing their education due to various reasons, it is becoming one of the serious problems of the university college. The prevalence of attrition is generally high. The problem is explained by the guidance and counseling service rendered for large number of students who decide to withdraw and sign for the withdrawal form. Signing on withdrawal forms and counseling those who decide to withdraw is becoming the major task of our office.

However there is agreement on the major causes identified by the above informants and are listed as follows.

- Unstable working conditions such as conflict with bosses and change of workplace of those students who have jobs;
- Financial problem;
- Academic failure;
- Maternal cases (pregnancy);

Family problems, such as having conflict with the parents;

To go to abroad (the counselor here emphasized that female students discontinue their education to go to Arab countries);

Transfer to other institutions.

The writer verified the above causes as important by tallying causes cited in a document which shows the department, causes and name of students who withdraw from the university college.

With regard to the solutions of the problem, the informants recommended the university college consider the following issues.

There should be flexible system to solve the problems of students of the University College.

Research has to be conducted to design a system which can accommodate the major problems of students;

Creating awareness about the college environment to increase self-esteem;

The guidance and counseling service should be well organized and improved;

More importantly, the university college should give attention to the problem of attrition.

### **Analysis of data collected through the questionnaire.**

The questionnaire, having 21 items, was administered to students to gather data about major causes of student attrition in St. Mary's University College. The responses were analyzed as follows.

Cause of attrition	Level of importance of the causes in frequency, percent and mean						
	<i>Very important</i>	<i>Important</i>	<i>Moderately important</i>	<i>Less important</i>	<i>Not important</i>	$\bar{X}$	<i>Sd</i>
Adjustment problem with other students and the university community	21 (11.6)	23 (12.7)	34 (18.8)	35 (19.3)	64 (35.4)	2.45	1.40
Lack of competency to carry out educational careers properly	50 (27.6)	39 (21.5)	38 (21.0)	24 (13.3)	23 (12.7)	3.40	1.38
Being assigned to a department which is not ones choice	40 (22.1)	22 (12.2)	15 (8.3)	15 (8.3)	82 (45.3)	2.56	1.68
Lack of information and encouragement from the university college	54 (29.8)	25 (13.8)	39 (21.5)	26 (14.4)	31 (17.1)	3.26	1.48
Lack of study and note taking skills	54 (31.0)	36 (20.7)	45 (25.9)	21 (12.1)	18 (10.3)	3.50	1.32
Scarcity of reference materials	31 (17.1)	22 (12.4)	33 (18.6)	40 (22.6)	51 (28.8)	2.67	1.45
Distorted information provided to freshman students from seniors	28 (15.5)	21(12.2)	17(9.9)	34(19.8)	72(41.9)	2.41	1.52
Grading policy of the university college	58( 33.7)	29( 16.9)	27 ( 15.5)	24 ( 14.0)	34 (19.8)	3.31	1.54
Lack of guidance and counseling services	53 ( 29.9)	50 ( 28.2)	35 ( 19.8)	20 ( 11.3)	19 ( 10.7)	3.55	1.31
Poor academic performance	94(53.7)	29(16.6)	22(12.2)	13(7.4)	17(9.7)	3.97	1.36
Inability to pay tuition fees and other expenses	95(54.3)	27(15.4)	20(11.4)	17(9.7)	16(9.1)	3.96	1.37

Cause of attrition	Level of importance of the causes in frequency, percept and mean						
	<i>Very important</i>	<i>Important</i>	<i>Moderately important</i>	<i>Less important</i>	<i>Not important</i>	$\bar{X}$	<i>Sd</i>
Long distance from home to the university college	38(21.8)	35(20.1)	36(20.7)	29(16.7)	36(20.7)	3.06	1.44
Fear of abduction and rape on the way to and from the university college	11(6.3)	10(5.7)	17(9.7)	29(16.5)	109(61.9)	1.78	1.21
Instructors being unsupportive and not motivating students	28(15.8)	32(18.1)	43(24.3)	39(22.0)	35(19.8)	2.88	1.35
Less qualified and unmotivated instructors and administrators	27(15.3)	34(19.2)	39(22.0)	43(24.3)	34(19.2)	2.87	1.34
Students' low self-concept and belief that they cannot cope with academic demands	55(31.4)	38(21.7)	40(22.9)	24(13.7)	18(10.3)	3.50	1.33
Large class size and lack of teachers attention to those falling behind	42 ( 24.1)	27 (15.5)	40 (23.0)	25 ( 14.4)	40 ( 23.0)	3.03	1.48
Lack of support and cooperation from the students' supervisors at work place	78(44.6)	36(20.6)	32(18.3)	18(10.3)	11(6.3)	3.87	1.26
Being addicted to drugs and gambling	54(32.0)	16(9.5)	21(12.4)	36(21.3)	42(24.3)	3.02	1.61
Students' family breakdown and divorce	54(34.2)	18(11.4)	28(17.7)	32(20.3)	26(16.5)	3.27	1.51
Frequent absenteeism	82(46.9)	34(19.4)	29(16.6)	21(12.0)	9(5.1)	3.91	1.26

As it is shown in the table above, respondents reported that the following are important causes of attrition in St. Mary's University College.

- Lack of competency to carry out educational careers properly on the part of students;
- Lack of information and encouragement from the university college;
- Lack of study and note taking skills;
- Grading policy of the university college;
- Lack of guidance and counseling services;
- Poor academic performance of students;
- Inability to pay tuition fees and other expenses;
- Long distance from home to the university college;
- Students' low self-concept and belief that they cannot cope with academic demands;
- Large class size and lack of teachers' attention to those falling behind;
- Lack of support and cooperation from the students' supervisors at the work place;
- Being addicted to drugs and gambling;
- Frequent absenteeism from class for various reasons;
- Family breakdown and divorce.

It is also possible to see from the table that respondents perceive that the following factors are less important or not important for students' discontinuation of their education.

- Adjustment problem with other students and the university community;
- Being assigned to a department which is not ones choice;
- Scarcity of reference materials;
- Distorted information provided to freshman students from seniors;
- Fear of abduction and rape on the way to and from the university college;
- Instructors being unsupportive and not motivating student
- Less qualified and unmotivated instructors.

As reported by students, it generally appears that the following causes are found to be exceptionally grave in making students withdraw, dismiss and drop out from their college.

- Poor academic performance;
- Inability to pay tuition fees and other expenses;
- Frequent absenteeism from class;
- Lack of support and cooperation from the students' supervisors at the work place;
- Lack of guidance and counseling services.

#### **IV. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

Previous research showed that a number of factors are responsible for making students discontinuing their education from higher learning institutions. These factors could be economic, psychological, academic, administrative or social.

Analysis of the data collected revealed that the following are important causes of students' discontinuation of their education from St. Mary's University College.

- Academic failure;
- Financial problem;
- Unstable working conditions such as conflict with the bosses and change of work places of those students who have regular jobs;
- Maternal cases such as pregnancy;
- Family problems such as conflict with parents;
- Going abroad;
- Transfer to other institutions;
- Frequent absenteeism from class;
- Lack of guidance and counseling services;
- Lack of competency to carry out educational careers;
- Lack of study and note taking skills;



- Grading policy of the university college;
- Large class size and lack of teachers' attention to those falling behind.

Therefore, to reduce the magnitude of student attrition in the university college the writer of this paper would like to recommend the following.

The university college has to design a flexible system that could address the financial and family problems of the students and conduct practical research to design such a system.

- The guidance and counseling service in the University College should be well organized and improved. Special attention should also be given to the task of student advising and the professional competency of instructors.
- Training and orientation should be given to students on how they can take notes from reference materials and during lectures. Students should also be helped to develop good study skills.
- Students reported that the grading system is one cause of student attrition. So, the University College should revisit its grading policy. The university college should also devise mechanisms where those instructors who do not have knowledge of measurement and evaluation should be instructed accordingly.
- Extension students have problems getting cooperation from their employees. The university college could contact major employers of its students and discuss the issue.
- The university college is also advised to reduce the number of students in a class so that instructors can give support to those who are behind in their academic career.

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