



Literature Review on Course Withdrawal

Purpose:

The Enrollment Strategies Committee at Crafton Hills College held discussions in the Spring 2021 semester concerning enrollment and student retention rates. Upon withdrawing from a course, students at CHC are asked to identify the reasons as to why they are dropping a course. During this discussion, it was determined that Crafton Hills College could benefit from expanding the response choices that students are given. The purpose of this literature review is to examine research that has been conducted into why students in higher education drop their courses and use these to inform the addition of new response choices for students. This will help Crafton better understand the reasons why students are dropping and use this feedback to improve its services.

Notes:

While research into course and college retention goes back to before the 1960s, more recent seminal work has been prioritized for the purpose of this review.

There are common factors associated with course withdrawal patterns. Most can be broken down to academic versus non-academic factors.

Academic factors typically consist of three elements:

- Course: Could include aspects of a course such as course difficulty or course scheduling.
- Instructor: This would include items such as the student's interaction with the faculty member or their teaching methods.
- Student: This includes a student's satisfaction with performance or their desire to continue in a course.

Non-Academic factors typically consist of three elements:

- Personal: This could include issues regarding a student's belief in their own skills, issues at home, at the workplace, or their health.
- Financial: This would include concerns about finances or the need for the student to work support themselves or their family.
- Work: This consists of work schedule changes or changes in work responsibility.

Summary:

Table I lists the major academic factors that researchers have found to contribute to an increase in course withdrawal rates, examples of those factors, and the authors that cited these factors.

Table I. Academic Factors That Contribute to Increased Course Withdrawal Rates

Factors	Examples	Authors Referencing Factors
Student Performance	Student satisfaction with their performance.	Reed (1981), Miller (1997), Wheland et al. (2012)
Student Motivation	The degree to which students found the subject interesting or the desire the student had in taking the course initially.	Rand (1981), Dunwoody and Frank (1995), Babad et al. (2008)
Interactions with Instructors	Students not having favorable view or interaction with their instructors; students being disappointed in teaching quality.	Dunwoody and Frank (1995), Conklin (1997), Summer (2000), Wheland et al. (2012), Michalski (2014)
Course-Specific Factors	Course difficulty; the timing of when the course is offered.	Conklin (1997), Summer (2000), Babad et al. (2008), Michalski (2014)
Mode of Instruction	Whether the class was offered face-to-face, hybrid or online.	Babad et al. (2008), Jagers and Xu (2010), Xu and Jagers (2011), Michalski (2014), McKinney et al. (2019)
Perceived Need of Course	Whether the course being offered was perceived to be relevant to the student's program of study.	Xenos et al. (2002), Kinnunen and Malmi (2008), Wladis et al. (2014)
Academic Load	Student was taking too many classes during a semester.	Adams and Becker (2010), Conklin (1997), Summer (2000)
Technical Issues	Encountering technical issues	Hara (2000), Michalski (2014)

Table 2 lists the major non-academic factors that researchers have found to contribute to an increase in course withdrawal rates, examples of those factors, and the authors that cited these factors.

Table 2. Non-Academic Factors That Contribute to Increased Course Withdrawal Rates

Factors	Examples	Authors Referencing Factors
Personal Issues	Problems at home; family issues or obligations.	Dunwoody and Frank (1995), Conklin's (1997), Summer (2000), Aldridge and Rowley (2001), Scoggin and Styron (2006), Buck et al. (2013), Michalski (2014)
Financial Issues	The need to work to pay bills; the financial stress a student is feeling.	Dunwoody and Frank (1995), Aldridge and Rowley (2001), Morris et al. (2005), Scoggin and Styron (2006), Michalski (2014), Mukherjee et al. (2017)
Job/responsibilities/scheduling conflict	Work schedule conflicting with course schedule. Work responsibilities making it difficult to attend school.	Dunwoody and Frank (1995), Conklin's (1997), Summer (2000), Scoggin and Styron (2006), Buck et al. (2013)
Low confidence in skills and competence	Student's lack of belief in their ability to complete the semester or remain in college.	Meeuwisse et al. (2010)
Health issues	Any health concerns or issues that a student is facing.	Scoggin and Styron (2006), Michalski (2014)

Findings:

Academic Factors

One of the academic factors that have been found to contribute to an increase in course withdrawal rates relates to **the student's performance in the course**. In a study of students at a large midwestern state university, Reed (1981) found that **perceptions of their own performance** made it more likely for students to continue in a course. This finding was affirmed by Wheland et al.'s (2012) study since the most cited reason for students withdrawing from a course is their fear of receiving a lower grade or failing the course. This is not just limited to students who have underperformed in the past. For example, Miller (1997) stated that **students having a higher cumulative GPA** were found to be more likely to withdraw from courses. Miller suggests that this could be due to the student's fear of losing their higher GPA.

Another factor associated with course withdrawals is **motivation** which Reed (1981) defines as **the initial desire a student has in taking the course, their desire to stay in the course, and the extent to which they found the class interesting**. Reed found these factors to be important determinants in a student's decision to withdraw from a course. Dunwoody and Frank (1995) also found that course withdrawals were attributed to **students not liking the course and a lack of interest in the subject of the course**. Kinnunen and Malmi (2006) studied reasons that non-majors withdrew from an introductory programming course. **A lack of interest in the subject and low study motivation** were two factors that contributed to their decision to drop the course. In a follow up to Kinnunen and Malmi's study, Petersen et al. (2016) examined the drop rates for the same class at a later point. The researchers noted that a key factor for withdrawal was **a lack of time but that is based on the relative importance** placed by students on the specific programming course relative to their other courses.

Research has also attributed course withdrawal due to **students' impressions of or interactions with instructors**. Dunwoody and Frank (1995) also found that course withdrawals were explained, in part, due to students experiencing problems with faculty. Conklin (1997) noted that a student's dislike of a professor was found to be among the top five reasons students cited as their reasoning for withdrawing from a course. This has been affirmed by other researchers studying the issue (Summer 2000; Wheland et al. 2012; Michalski 2014). Babad et al. (2008) examined teaching quality and its impact on course cancellations by looking at elective courses. They found that the relationship between class cancellations and teaching quality were highest in teacher-centered lecture courses versus that of a student-centered seminar course.

Researchers have noted the existence of **elements of courses** that impact a student's decision to stay in the class. Conklin's (1997) study of course withdrawal uncovered that two of the top five reasons cited for students withdrawing from classes were the **course time and course difficulty**. Conklin notes that colleges may be able to impact withdrawals by modifying how and when courses are offered. Summer's (2000) examination into the course withdrawal rates of students at Johnson County Community College highlighted that the prevalence of these student concerns differed depending on the **discipline of the course**. Some of the more widespread factors contributing to a student's decision to withdraw were the course being **too difficult (17%)** or the courses being **at a bad time (16%)**. In Babad et al.'s (2008) study, they examined a model of analyzing course syllabi and determining whether one could predict course cancellations based on components in the syllabi. Babad et al. found that the syllabus quality had no impact

on course cancellations and withdrawals. **Course difficulty**, however, was found to impact drop rates in undergraduate elective lecture courses. **Course scheduling** was also a factor in the drop rates of students from Florida State College (Michalski 2014).

The **method in which a class is taught** has also come up as being a significant factor in this research. Babad et al. (2008) noted that course cancellation rates were higher among elective courses where students were not active in their learning (i.e., seminar courses had lower drop and cancellation rates). McKinney et al. (2019) found that entirely online courses had a higher withdrawal rate than those courses featuring some in-person instruction. Michalski (2014) noted that the delivery mode of the course was among the most common academic reasons for dropping a course. This affirmed the findings in Jagers and Xu's (2010) work in which they discovered that students taking online courses earlier in their college education had higher drop rates compared to those taking only face-to-face courses. This finding was consistent across both remedial and non-remedial courses. They also found that students taking online courses earlier in earlier semesters were less likely to return to school in future semesters. These results were consistent across two different cohorts being studied. In more recent research, Xu and Jagers (2011) were unable to find a consistent positive or negative impact for students taking hybrid courses.

Another reason why students drop out of a course has been linked to their **perceived need of the specific course being taken**. Reid (1981) found that dropout rates were higher for elective courses. Kinnunen and Malmi (2008) found that whether a course was part of the student's study plan contributed to their decision to drop an introduction to programming class. This was echoed in Petersen et al.'s (2016) study of the same programming course which noted that the student's **future plans led them to prioritize the courses they drop**. In their study, Wladis et al. (2014) mentioned that courses which were elective or distributional requirements for a major had a greater drop rate. These differences were statistically significant. Lower-level elective courses or lower-level courses taken to fulfill requirements have statistically lower retention rates online compared to courses taken face-to-face. This reinforced Xenos et al.'s (2002) finding that lower-level online courses that were not a part of a student's major had a higher drop rate.

Academic load of students was another factor determining course drops. Adams and Becker (1990) stated that students who attempted more credits in a quarter and those with a history of course withdrawals were more likely to withdraw from their current courses. Conklin (1997) noted that of the high attrition respondents in the survey, 12% noted that their **course load was too heavy**. Summer (2000) found similar rates for high attrition classes.

Technological problems are another factor identified in the literature as leading to higher course attrition rates. Hara and King's (2000) study consisted of a mixed-method approach consisting of observation of an online discussion forum, interviews, and reviews of course documents such as the syllabus and assignments. The population consisted of students taking an online course. Students reported their frustration with technological issues that they encountered and the lack of personnel to provide technical support in these situations. In Michalski's (2014) text analysis of course withdrawal reasons technological issues were identified as being a factor, although less prevalent to others such as course schedule or delivery method preferences, in a student's decision to withdraw from a course.

Non-Academic Factors

Non-academic factors are also mentioned within the literature as contributing to course withdrawal rates. Dunwoody and Frank (1995) identified the main reasons for course withdrawals were related to **work responsibilities** or **issues with family (i.e., personal reasons)**. In Conklin's (1997) research, she found **work scheduling conflicts** as well as **personal problems** were two of the top five reasons students cited for withdrawing from classes. These two factors played the greatest role students withdrawing from a course in Summer's (2000) research, 24% of students citing scheduling conflicts and 19% citing personal issues. Students withdrawing from an animal science course at the University of Kentucky relayed to the instructor that their decision to drop was due to **time constraints** due to **family** or **career-related responsibilities** (Buck et al. 2013).

Non-academic factors also include health issues, financial issues, and a belief in a student's own ability with regards to skills and ability to get through college. Dunwoody and Frank (1995) also mentioned that the highest contributing items that determined whether a student would drop their course was the **need to work to alleviate financial difficulties**. Aldridge and Rowley (2001) surveyed students to understand the reasons why they withdrew from courses. The top responses in the personal section included difficulties in their **domestic life** (20%), **finances** (17%), and with **traveling** (23%). Morris et al. (2005) cited the **availability of financial assistance** as being a factor which could predict whether a student remained in a course. Scoggin and Styron (2006) examined reasons why students dropped their courses at a community college in south Mississippi. Upon dropping a course, students were presented with a list of options as to why they withdrew. **Personal reasons** were the most prevalent with 46% of responses submitted selecting this as a reason for withdrawal. This was followed by 22% selecting **financial reasons**, 17% selecting **work reasons**. Additionally, 11% of responses submitted indicated the presence of **health issues**. These results were further disaggregated by demographic variables. Scoggin and Styron found that **women** cited **personal reasons** more frequently whereas **men** identified **work reasons** more frequently. **African-American students** were also found to cite **financial and health reasons** more frequently as contributing to their decision to drop courses relative to White students. Building upon his earlier work in 2011, Michalski (2014) performed a text analysis on a course withdrawal database for students from Florida State College. Text comments from the beginning of the Fall 2010 term were examined. The common nonacademic rationales included **work, family, financial, and health issues**. Students that indicated **higher degrees of financial stress** or **lower financial well-being** were likely to question their ability to get through college and were more likely to reduce their course load (Mukherjee et al. 2017). Meeuwisse et al. (2010) examined withdrawal trends for students in higher vocational education within the Netherlands and found that among the plethora of reasons students withdrew, one of them had to do with the **student's perceived lack of ability in skills and competence**.

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