

Desertion in Distance Education, Living Together in Higher Education



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ABSTRACT: The paper reports a study of desertion of a distance education programme in a Colombian University to explore the reasons for desertion. The study is based upon the conception that desertion involves the student's failure to complete a particular cycle of education, but that this is a collective rather than an individual phenomenon, and has causes both inside and outside the educational system. The study concludes that causes of desertion are many and varied, and that they cannot easily be separated in terms of their explanatory power.

KEYWORDS: Desertion, Distance Education, Educational System.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports the outcomes of a study conducted at the Colombian University. The purpose of this project was to establish theoretical rates of desertion of students on the distance programme in the cohorts studied, A period-H period, in order to analyse the phenomenon and its causes.

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Desertion happens in two ways: one permanent, when the student withdraws definitively from the educative process, and the other temporary, that is when some time passes after the withdrawal and the student returns again to her/his studies.

A number of scholars have studied the phenomenon of non-completion, and in developing a theoretical framework for this study, the works of Seidman, (2012), Lenning (2013), Tinto (2012), Hurt (2004), Bramble (2008), Black (2019), Black (2018), Webber (2020), Eastman (2023), Cohen (2023), Herron (2023), Reason (2023), Bentrin (2022), Keengwe (2023), Isserles (2021), were studied.

Starting from these studies, explanatory models of desertion can be developed (Eastman, 2023). Between them is known the one that argues that desertion is the result of a complex social integration and interaction between from the student's side and the related professional identification and academic commitment to the institution.

Social Integration and commitment to the institution

When the social integration of the student with his/her group is weak, the student does not adapt and tends to desertion, unless that she/he finds a companion with whom she/he can develop an empathetic relationship and so she/he can conclude the course, supported by this relationship. Even so, this situation is likely to produce an increased tendency towards desertion.

Another aspect that usually affects in the social integration of the student as well as her/his commitment to the institution is the academic and personal relationship between tutor and student. It is been found that the satisfaction level with the relationships tutor is significantly different for completers and non-completers of academic programmes (Cohen, 2023).

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From the administrative point of view, this situation can be exacerbated by delays in the delivery of materials and frequent changes in schedule, which could happen in distance programmes. This can demoralise students, as well as damaging their image of the programme and institution.

All this would generate what Tinto (2012), has described as an absence of “social integration” and “commitment to or identification with the institution”, or at least a low level of these attributes, which are important to persevere in the university studies.

Academic Commitment and Professional Identification

The second dimension of the model set out by Herron (2023), after looking at a number of studies, refers to the intellectual capacity, to the academic commitment and to the professional identification of the student. A student may still be compelled to leave a programme, in spite of good social integration and commitment, if they cannot achieve a satisfactory academic standard.

Poor academic performance may have two causes: insufficient intellectual capacity or lack academic commitment. In the former case, the student is obliged to leave her/his studies and not much can be done. Many studies have identified intellectual ability as a good predictor of completion (Reason, 2023).

On the other hand, lack of academic commitment, can have a remedy. Distance learning, requires the student to take responsibility for their own learning. Otherwise, the student does not advance and ends abandoning the programme.

In securing student commitment, clear and firm occupational goals can be extremely helpful and according to some investigators, this factor is the most important in explaining academic commitment and retention phenomenon. The student that has a definite occupational aim tends to put all her/his effort to continue in the University. In the educational area, for example, the promotion ladder and the economic stimuli that this provides are intermediate goals that promote retention. There is, however, a difficulty: occupational goals act more effectively in those that work in areas related to the academic programme than in those whose experience is completely divorced from the content of the programme (Bentrin, 2022).

Professional identification it is considered a strong motivational factor in academic perseverance. This identification is taken in this context as that felling of commitment to the professional function that is peculiar to a specific academic programme (Keengwe, 2023), (Isserles, 2021), noted the relationship between strong occupational goals and retention in the university. Reason (2023) found that the effect was higher in certain programmes, particularly in the technological field and in the initial training of teachers (Reason, 2023), but not in other programmes.

Socio-economic, Educative and Demographic Factors

Other important exogenous causes in our study have been identified: lack of economic resources, socio-cultural aspect from the environment; the family influence, and cultural background; maturity / age; marital status; all of these factors can impact in diverse ways upon the likelihood that the student will complete his/her studies. Bramble (2008), for example, give great importance to these socio-economic, educative and family factors as reasons for desertion. Black (2018), insist upon the multi-causality of desertion and they mention academic, personal social and cultural causes to the university of desertion.

Theoretical delimitation of the present study

A model of the factors influencing desertion from higher education adapted from Tinto (2012). In a first moment, induction into the programme, the professional identification, the academic commitment, the occupational goal and the institutional identification, play a fundamental part. In a second moment, the one of process in the programme, the academic performance is translated into intellectual development and capability. The relationships with the companions and tutor-adviser, tend to support the induction conditions already mentioned or to debilitate the student, producing a new situation around the academic goals and institutional identification. In a third moment the student assimilates the impact of the internal reality of the programme and of the socio-economic circumstances of the environment. These conditions affect the student considerably as the student enters the fourth moment, the decision to desertion or persevere. These four moments make up the decision making model which is being examined here.

Methodological Design and Execution. Investigation variables

In order to study the impact of various factors on desertion /perseverance on students in the cohorts studied, information was collected on the students as follows: sex, age, academic degree, marital status, area or academic programme, regional study centre, course level; study habits, academic capacity, integration as student in the group, professional identification, individual and family socio-economic situation; and whether the student completed the programme or not. The fact that desertions were difficult to

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contact after they left the programme, coupled with the frequent transfer of teachers from region to region and from town to town in the Department of Antioch, made impossible to operate a random sampling technique. Instead, students were selected from three groups: 1) Medellín, Santa Fe, Fredonia and Cisneros; 2) Apartado, Berrio, Cauca, Segovia, Frontino and San Carlos; and 3) Yarumal, Tamesis, Sonson and Andes. It was decided that a level of confidence of 95% (probability of error less than 0.05) would be used in all statistical tests.

The Distance Education programme files, as well the records of the Admission Office and Registry of the University of Antioch provided the majority of the data.

For the purpose of the project a distinction is made between those who leave the programme because they fail on assessment, or who make an irrevocable decision to leave the programme (absolute desertions), and those who have secured the complete the programme at a later date if they choose (relative desertions). A questionnaire was used to collect data on 63 items about the individual, professional, socio-economical, demographic and attitudinal characteristics of non-completers. A pilot test was made and 800 of questionnaires were sent to the entire regional centre of which 156 were returned. From these 156 questionnaires, 6 were rejected in the process of data cleaning.

Individual interviews with non-completers and group interviews with completers in the different regional centres were made to find out the causes of the high desertion rates. These interviews were recorded on tape.

2. ANALYSIS

The number of students enrolled in the Distance Education Programme in the cohorts from A period-H period totalled 2,935 students (See *Table 1*). From these 2,935 students, 1,063 were male (39%) and 1,650 female (61%).

Table 1 shows the number of students in different cohorts who were enrolled in each of the semesters from A period-H period; those who failed to re-enrol in successive years were those who had dropped out of the programme. *Table 1* makes clear that the highest levels of absolute desertion occurred early in the programme, normally in the first two semesters.

Table 1. Students enrolled and continuing per semester.

Enrol ▶ Cont. ▼	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
A	490	*	*	*	*	*	*
B	239	295	*	*	*	*	*
C	192	193	713	*	*	*	*
D	176	143	376	71	*	*	*
E	169	139	311	50	125	*	*
F	166	128	271	39	99	597	*
G	160	122	252	33	78	385	422
H	152	120	232	28	64	312	295

Source: self-made.

In the F period and G period, 276 (46.3%) students left because they failed an assignment, being the year of the highest absolute desertion. In contrast with this, the A period was the one with lowest absolute desertion rates, as only 33 (5.5%) students left for that reason. Data was also collected on the extent to which desertion affected students in different academic areas. The Social Sciences showed the highest proportion of absolute desertions. The vocational programme of Industrial Mechanic Engineering, exhibited the lowest absolute desertion rates with only 3 students (5.0%) leaving.

In the interviews, students were asked for their reasons for dropping-out of the programme. The most frequently cited reasons were economic; expenses for transport, lodging and food were most frequently given as grounds for not continuing with the Distance Education programme.

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Desertion rates were also linked to the regional centre in which the student enrolled. The highest desertion rate was observed in San Carlos with a desertion rate of 76%. This was followed by Segovia (70%), Yarumal (60%) and Cisneros (55%). The lowest desertion rates were found in Medellin (37%), Sonson (39%) and Fredonia (41%).

3. CONCLUSIONS

In the theoretical model developed from the literature, the need for institutional affiliation, social integration, academic ability and academic commitment were highlighted, together with a sense of professional identification and an adequate socio-economic situation. In fact, 40% of all desertions were forced to leave the programme following their failure to pass an examination or assessment, and 78.66% of the desertions left the programme in the first two semesters of study. This indicates that they had not developed appropriate strategies of independent study, and were not sufficiently committed to academic study. This suggests that commitment and ability to manage one’s own study might be used more forcefully as selection criteria, or that an introductory, preparatory semester might be introduced which addressed these issues directly (Keengwe, 2023).

However, lack of academic commitment cannot be analysed in isolation; low levels of academic commitment also interact with the way the programme operates, with the socio-economic situation of the student and of the province where they are located. With respect to the former, the desertion rates reflect the way the programme has been managed by the University, the quality and delivery of the distance learning materials, the quality of tutorial support, and the failure of the programme to establish collaborative study groups in many towns (Herron, 2023).

As has been noted above, the student’s socio-economic situation was established as a major source of desertion in the programme. Specifically, it was clear that where the costs to the individual student were high, or where students had a particularly high level of economic commitment to the support of their families, or where the students were in a region where the economy was weak, enrolment rates were low and desertion rates were high (Cohen, 2023).

In this study, the failure of students to form a strong identification with their proposed future profession was not identified as a major cause of desertion. However, the student body was not typical in respect of their professional affiliation. The majority of those who enrolled on the programme were teachers who had a broad experience of education, and who were relatively mature – normally in mid-career. It may therefore be assumed that they had developed a strong professional affiliation before entering the programme. This is in marked contrast with earlier studies, where the students were younger and has no strong links to their future professional association (Eastman, 2023). Even so, the level of professional identification may be related to academic commitment of the student, and this may influence the effort which students make to complete the programme. The level of professional affiliation may therefore have a secondary impact upon desertion rates. (Figure 1).

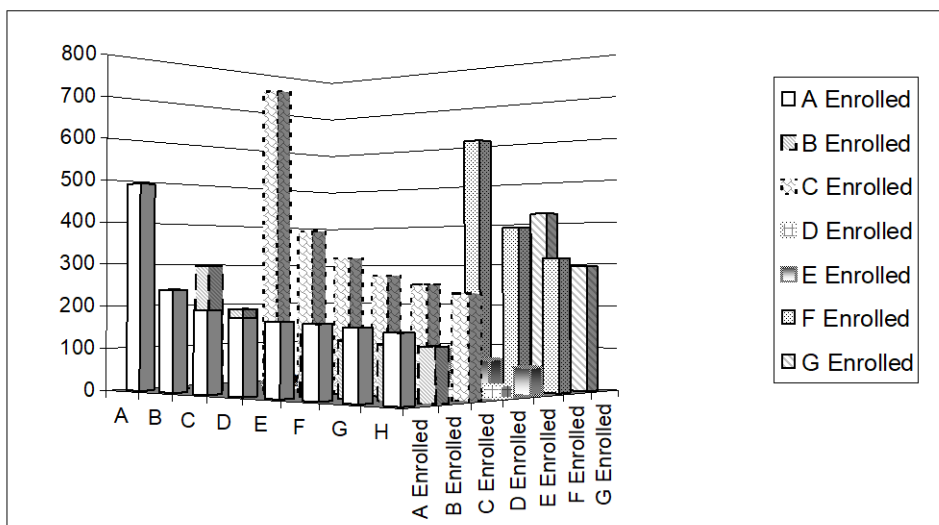


Figure 1: Enrolment and continuation diagrammatically represented
Source: self-made.

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