Without a Trace

An Examination of Former Post-Secondary Students Who Left the System Without a Credential and Did Not Return

Findings from the 2009 Short Stay Early Leaver Student Outcomes Survey

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Contents

Executive Summary

Every year, thousands of students in British Columbia's post-secondary system leave their institutions without receiving a credential. Many of these are short-term stop outs, and many have merely transferred to another public post-secondary school in the province, but some "true leavers" are students who, for various reasons, have left their programs. To supplement our knowledge of student outcomes from surveys of graduates and near-graduates in B.C.'s colleges, institutes, and universities, the public post-secondary institutions, together with the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development and BC Stats, surveyed 5,036 of these leavers (of a potential cohort of 15,008 - a 34 percent response rate) in the summer of 2009.

The purpose of the *2009 Short Stay/Early Leaver Student Outcomes Survey* was to gather data on the educational experiences and outcomes of those who disappeared from B.C.'s post-secondary system "without a trace." These data could provide invaluable information on why students leave without earning a credential, and what actions, if any, might have been taken to help them complete a credential. The key finding of this survey is that the 15,000 students who annually leave the B.C. public post-secondary system without a credential have diverse goals and experiences that are primarily positive.

A "short stay" student is one who left after taking only a few courses. An "early leaver" is one who took quite a few courses, but left before completing all program requirements.

Previous research has shown that most leavers report being satisfied with the education they received, and that achieving a credential was not always a primary goal for enrolling. Results from this study confirm this: 84 percent of respondents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their studies. In order to identify leavers for whom actions on the part of the institution may have led them to stay longer, respondents were divided into two groups:

- "Happy Leavers" either stayed as long as they had originally planned, or reported that they had completely or mostly met their goals (59 percent of respondents)
- "Unhappy Leavers" left earlier than they had originally planned without meeting their goals (41 percent of respondents)

Unhappy leavers were asked supplementary questions about their departure from studies, and their responses provide insight into what measures might be taken to increase retention.

Characteristics of Leavers

Forty-four percent of leavers were from colleges and institutes, 30 percent were from teaching-intensive universities, and 26 percent were from research universities. Women made up 57 percent of the cohort; men, 43 percent. The median age was 26 years. Ten percent had not earned any credits at their time of departure, 41 percent had between 1 and 15 credits, 19 percent had between 16 and 30 credits, and 30 percent had more than 30 earned credits.

Goals When First Enrolled

Just over half of respondents identified "complete a credential at this institution" as a main goal for enrolling. Other common goals were "decide on a career/change careers" (22 percent), "learn new job skills" (19 percent), and "improve existing job skills" (14 percent). Happy leavers were more likely to have chosen job-related goals than were unhappy leavers.

Extent to Which Original Goals Were Met

More than half of all respondents completely or mostly met their goals for enrolling, despite leaving without a credential. Leavers from colleges and institutes were more likely to have met their goals than were leavers from universities.

Enrolment

Almost three-quarters of leavers reported having been enthusiastic about high school studies; this was true for both happy and unhappy leavers. Ninety-four percent of leavers were enthusiastic when beginning their post-secondary studies and happy leavers had higher initial levels of enthusiasm than unhappy leavers.

Nine out of ten respondents had been very or somewhat clear on their reasons for enrolling, and 83 percent were clear on which courses to take. Less clarity when starting increased the chances of leaving unhappy.

Four out of five respondents indicated that the institution they attended had been their first choice. Reasons for choosing the institution varied slightly by leaver type: happy leavers were more likely than unhappy leavers to have made their choice based on reputation of program or institution. Unhappy leavers were more likely than happy leavers to have chosen based on the location of the institution, or the presence of friends there.

Quality

Both happy and unhappy leavers gave high ratings to the quality of services and student life, though unhappy leavers were more likely to rate counselling and advising services as poor or very poor (19 percent, compared with 10 percent of happy leavers).

Quality of courses was also highly rated: 77 percent of respondents rated quality of instruction as good or very good. Again, there were variations by leaver type. Unhappy leavers were more likely than happy leavers to rate different aspects of their courses as poor or very poor.

More than half of the respondents (59 percent) felt a sense of belonging while attending at least to some extent, with happy leavers more likely to have felt a sense of belonging compared with unhappy leavers.

Although about half of leavers said that their courses were neither difficult nor easy, courses were about twice as likely to be rated as difficult or very difficult than easy or very easy. This varied little by leaver type.

Both happy (94 percent) and unhappy (69 percent) leavers reported high levels of satisfaction with the education they received. When asked what they found most valuable about being a student, both groups were most likely to cite quality of instruction.

Although a third of the respondents left earlier than they had originally planned, these leavers were likely to say they were satisfied with the education they received.

Departure

Questions around departure were asked only of unhappy leavers, to help institutions identify potential improvements.

Over one-third of unhappy leavers (38 percent) reported that their grades were lower than they expected. Fifty-seven percent stopped attending classes during the last term they were enrolled, and the majority of these did so without informing anyone at the institution.

The most common main reason for leaving, cited by nearly a third of unhappy leavers, was personal circumstances (e.g., health, family). Other reasons cited included a change in plans about the program or a job (22 percent), disappointment with the institution (22 percent), and financial issues (18 percent). Leavers from research universities were more likely to specify finances or debt load compared with leavers from other types of institutions.

Sixty-four percent of unhappy leavers reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their decision to leave when they did.

The two factors most likely to have influenced unhappy leavers to stay longer were both finance-related: 48 percent said that "not having to work at a job while studying" would have influenced them to stay, and 45 percent said that "better financial support" would have. "Better quality of instruction" (41 percent) and "more support from faculty and staff" (39 percent) were also commonly reported as factors that may have influenced leavers to stay.

Financial Assistance and Support

About one-third of leavers overall (32 percent) said that financial problems influenced their decision to leave "to a great extent" (16 percent) or "to some extent" (16 percent), though those who left unhappy were more likely to have been influenced to leave by financial factors. The rate of incurring government-sponsored student loans did not vary by leaver type; only 23 percent of all leavers received loans and the median amount borrowed was $13,900.

By far the most common source of financial support reported was employment (63 percent), followed by support of family or friends (33 percent).

Subsequent Activity

At the time of the survey, 89 percent of respondents were in the labour force. The most common main activity in the four months immediately following departure was working (68 percent), and most of these leavers had had the job while enrolled. Eight percent were unemployed, the most common reason being "can't find a job/no jobs available".

Forty-two percent of leavers were either enrolled in further education at the time of the survey, or had been at some point since leaving. About two-thirds of those who had not yet enrolled said they planned to do so in the next two years.

Aboriginal Leavers

Seven percent of those surveyed self-identified as being Aboriginal. Results for Aboriginal leavers were similar to the overall results in most respects; however, there were some notable differences.

Aboriginal leavers were more likely to be older (median age 31) and they were spread more evenly across the province compared with non-Aboriginal leavers, over half of whom were in the lower mainland. Half of Aboriginal leavers were from colleges or institutes, compared with 44 percent of non-Aboriginal leavers.

Aboriginal leavers were more likely to have left happy compared with non-Aboriginal leavers, and slightly more likely to have been satisfied with the education received (86 percent compared with 84 percent). They also rated aspects of student life and courses higher than non-Aboriginal respondents, and they were more likely than non-Aboriginal leavers to have felt a sense of belonging while enrolled.

Main sources of funding varied as well, with Aboriginal leavers citing employment much less often (45 percent) than non-Aboriginal leavers (65 percent). Thirty-seven percent of Aboriginal leavers relied at least partially on First Nations or Band funding.

Like non-Aboriginal leavers, Aboriginal leavers were apt to identify financial pressures as a reason for departure, and 48 percent said that better financial support would have influenced them to stay longer, compared with 45 percent for non-Aboriginal leavers.

I. Introduction

The 2009 B.C. Short Stay/Early Leaver Student Outcomes Survey targeted students who left the B.C. public post-secondary system "without a trace." The eligible cohort included students from 24 public post-secondary institutions who had been registered at a B.C. public college, university college, institute, or university during the 2006/2007 academic year, had not received a credential and had not been enrolled at any B.C. public post-secondary institution at any point from September 1, 2007 until survey implementation in the summer of 2009. Overall 5,036 leavers completed the survey for a response rate of 34 percent.

A. Background

Each year the Ministries responsible for post-secondary education collaborate with B.C. public post-secondary institutions to survey graduates and near graduates from almost 2,000 distinct programs across 25 institutions. Gathering feedback from former students is an essential part of ensuring that the system is adequately preparing students and serving British Columbia's labour force needs. While the survey instruments vary by the type of credential granted, all students are asked core questions about their current employment, whether they have taken (or are taking) any further education since leaving, student loan debt incurred, and satisfaction with education.

The annual student outcomes surveys are:
- DACSO – The Diploma, Associate Degree, and Certificate Student Outcomes Survey is for graduates or near completers in diploma, associate degree, or certificate programs
- BGS - The Baccalaureate Graduates Survey is for baccalaureate graduates
- APPSO - The Apprenticeship Student Outcomes Survey is for former apprenticeship students
- DEVSO - The Developmental Student Outcomes Survey is for former Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students

Results of these surveys are used by institutions, prospective students, government, and educational researchers.

Aside from a small number of near-completers who are surveyed under DACSO, there are no regularly scheduled surveys to measure outcomes and opinions of the thousands of students who leave B.C. public post-secondary institutions each year without having obtained a credential.

B. Previous B.C. Studies on this topic

Previous research on leavers has focused on specific groups. The *2000 BC University Early Leavers Survey* targeted former students from the four research universities in B.C.: University of Northern British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia, and University of Victoria, who had come close to completing a baccalaureate. On the other hand, the *2003 B.C. College and Institute Short Stay Pilot Survey* targeted students from five B.C. colleges and one institute, limiting the cohort to students who had completed only 9 – 23 credits before leaving. The *Short Stay Pilot Survey* was in turn based on a provincially funded survey conducted by Douglas College in 1996.

Results from the *2000 BC University Early Leavers Survey* show that 59 percent of those surveyed had attended another post-secondary institution since leaving, as had 46 percent of respondents to the *2003 B.C. College and Institute Short Stay Pilot Survey.*
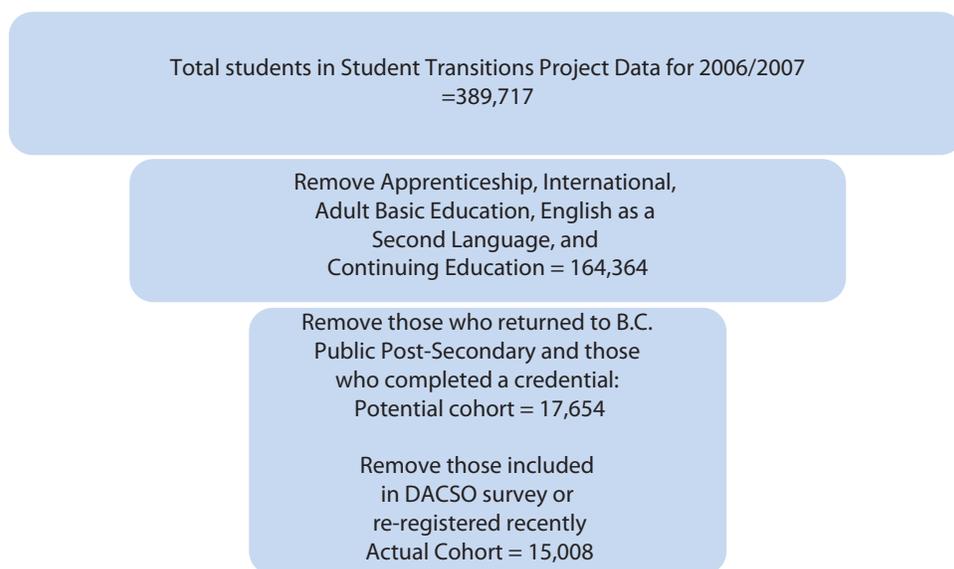
In contrast, the *2009 BC Short Stay/Early Leaver Student Outcomes Survey* targeted students who left the B.C. public post-secondary system "without a trace," i.e., without re-enrolling elsewhere. The eligible cohort included students from 24 public post-secondary institutions who:

- had been registered at a B.C. public college, university college, institute, or university during the 2006/2007 academic year;
- had not received a credential; and
- had not been enrolled at any B.C. public post-secondary institution at any point from September 1, 2007 until survey implementation in the summer of 2009.

This study made use of newly consolidated data to remove known transfer students. This approach, made possible for the first time by the BC Student Transitions Project described below, allowed the focus of the research to be on *true leavers* rather than those who may have taken advantage of the province's excellent transfer system to continue their education elsewhere in B.C. It was not possible to filter out leavers who enrolled at private post-secondary institutions in B.C. or at out-of-province institutions.

C. Survey Population and Response Rates

Data from the *B.C. Student Transitions Project* makes it possible to link the records of B.C. students as they proceed from secondary school through to post-secondary. This data set was used to select the survey population and, for the first time, exclude students who had registered elsewhere in the public post-secondary system. International students and students exclusively enrolled in continuing education, developmental, or apprenticeship programs were excluded. After removing these students, there were 164,364 students registered in the B.C. post-secondary system in academic year 2006/2007, three-quarters of whom returned in 2007/2008. Of the one-quarter who did not return, 56 percent had earned a credential, leaving a potential cohort of 17,654 cases. A further 2,646 cases were excluded from the survey cohort either because of prior inclusion as near completers in the DACSO survey (1,357) or because the student had re-registered after the original cohort was drawn (1,289).

Figure 1: Cohort Identification

Total students in Student Transitions Project Data for 2006/2007
=389,717

Remove Apprenticeship, International,
Adult Basic Education, English as a
Second Language, and
Continuing Education = 164,364

Remove those who returned to B.C.
Public Post-Secondary and those
who completed a credential:
Potential cohort = 17,654

Remove those included
in DACSO survey or
re-registered recently
Actual Cohort = 15,008

The final valid cohort of 15,008 comprised 6,648 leavers from thirteen colleges and institutes, 4,504 leavers from seven teaching-intensive universities, and 3,856 leavers from four research-intensive universities. For a complete list of participating institutions, please see Appendix A.

The survey was administered between May 6 and August 27, 2009; the average time to complete the survey was 14.2 minutes. Overall 5,036 leavers completed the survey for a response rate of 34 percent. Online completions made up 21.5 percent of completions (n=1,081) and telephone completions made up 78.5 percent of completions (n=3,955). Although response rates varied by institution, they were fairly consistent across institution types.

Response rates were also consistent by program area and credential sought, although there were some differences by age with older leavers more likely to have completed the survey.
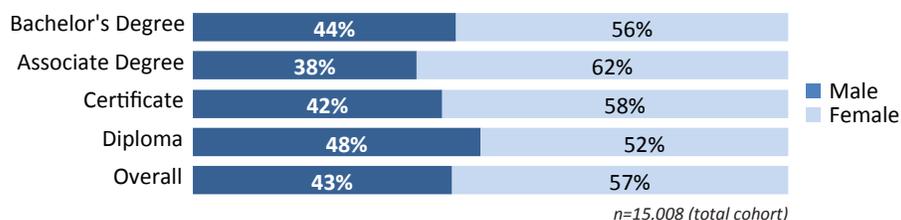
As is often the case with student outcomes surveys, women were more likely to complete the survey (35.5%) compared with men (31.0%).

II. Characteristics of Leavers

A. Gender

The cohort was 43 percent male and 57 percent female. This varies by type of credential being pursued, as shown in *Figure 2.*

Figure 2: Gender Distribution by Credential Sought

	Male	Female
Bachelor's Degree	44%	56%
Associate Degree	38%	62%
Certificate	42%	58%
Diploma	48%	52%
Overall	43%	57%

n=15,008 (total cohort)

Gender distribution in the B.C. post-secondary system can vary dramatically by program, which complicates direct comparisons of gender split between leavers and those who graduate.

B. Program Area

Former students can be grouped by the program area in which they were enrolled, regardless of institution type. Groupings used in this report are based on aggregations of *Classification of Instructional Programs* codes (CIP). For details please see Appendix B.

Figure 3: Cohort Percentage by Program Area

Arts and Sciences	43%
Business and Management	16%
Engineering and Applied Sciences	8%
Trades	6%
Other/Unclassified	6%
Education	6%
Visual and Performing Arts	5%
Health	5%
Human and Social Services	4%

n=15,008 (total cohort)
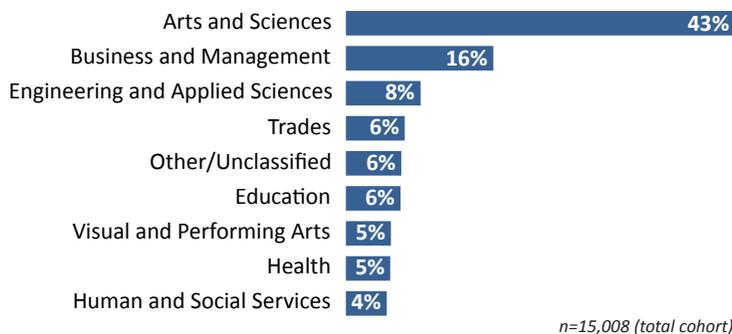
The most common program area, by a large margin, is Arts and Sciences at 43 percent of the cohort. The seven other program areas range in size from 4 percent for Human and Social Services to 16 percent in Business and Management. Not surprisingly, program area distribution varies widely by type of institution attended, although Arts and Sciences remains the most prevalent program area for all institution types. (Arts and Sciences can be a stepping stone into other program areas such as Applied Science and Business.)

Table 1: Program Area Distribution by Institution Type (Frequency)

Program Area	Colleges and Institutes	Research Universities	Teaching Universities	Overall
Arts and Sciences	2,238	1,925	2,250	6,413
Business and Management	1,324	133	974	2,431
Engineering and Applied Sciences	745	274	207	1,226
Trades	772	0	200	972
Other/Unclassified	1	915	0	916
Education	488	284	127	899
Visual and Performing Arts	240	163	340	743
Health	477	86	172	735
Human and Social Services	363	76	234	673
Total	6,648	3,856	4,504	15,008

Table 2: Program Area Distribution by Institution Type (Percentage)

| Program Area	Colleges and Institutes	Research Universities	Teaching Universities	Overall
Arts and Sciences	34%	50%	50%	43%
Business and Management	20%	3%	22%	16%
Engineering and Applied Sciences	11%	7%	5%	8%
Trades	12%	0%	4%	6%
Other/Unclassified	0%	24%	0%	6%
Education	7%	7%	3%	6%
Visual and Performing Arts	4%	4%	8%	5%
Health	7%	2%	4%	5%
Human and Social Services	5%	2%	5%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

A substantial percentage of leavers from research universities (24 percent) fall into the "Other/Unclassified" category because the courses for which they registered were not specific to a unique program area. Many of these leavers were not at university long enough to select a specific major area of study.

C. Age

Leavers' ages at the time of the survey ranged from 17 to 91 years old. Overall the median age was 26 years, while the mean was 30 years.

Leavers from special purpose/teaching universities were two years younger on average (25 years) than those from research universities or colleges and institutes (27 years). Men were typically two years younger than women (25 and 27 years respectively). Leavers from Health programs (35 years) and Education programs (36 years) were the oldest, while those from Trades programs were the youngest (24 years). Fifty-seven percent of leavers were under 30 years of age at the time they were surveyed.

Figure 4: Age Range at Time of Survey

n=14,969 (cohort), 5,024 (respondents)
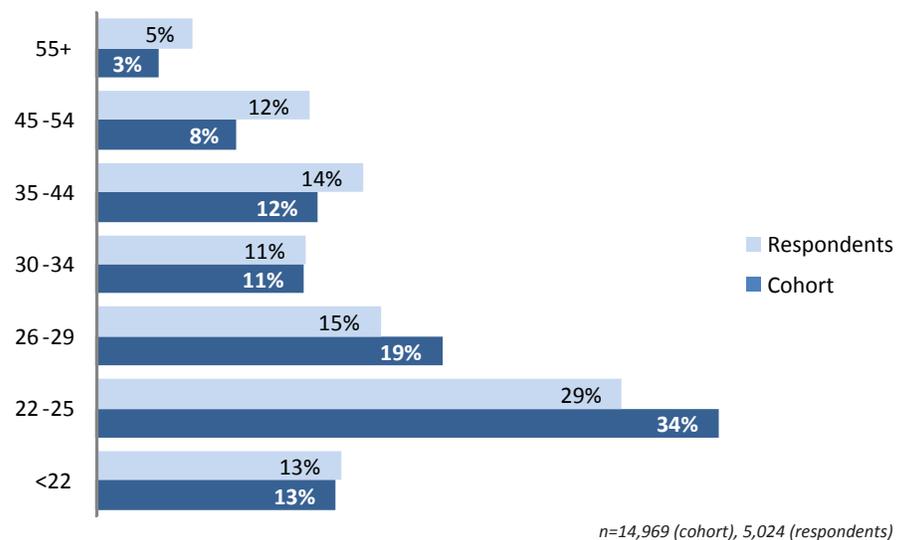
D. Credits Earned

Institutions were asked to submit data on the number of credits earned by each leaver. There are some limitations to the utility of this variable:

- It cannot be used to determine how close to earning a credential the student may have been, since programs vary in length
- Some institutions were unable to provide this information; others were able to provide it for only a subset of their leavers
- It cannot reliably indicate how far into a program a student may have been, since it includes all the credits earned at the institution and the student may have switched programs

These issues stem partly from the scope of the project: this is the first time leavers from all types of institutions and programs have been surveyed as a group, and since the institutions and programs are so diverse, there is no standard length of program or standard for the way

credits are reported. Despite the limitations, earned credits can be useful as a way to group students according to a measure of how much education they have completed. This would allow for the comparison of survey responses on questions of interest such as satisfaction, quality ratings, enthusiasm for studies, and so on.

Figure 5: Earned Credits at Time of Departure

n=13,059
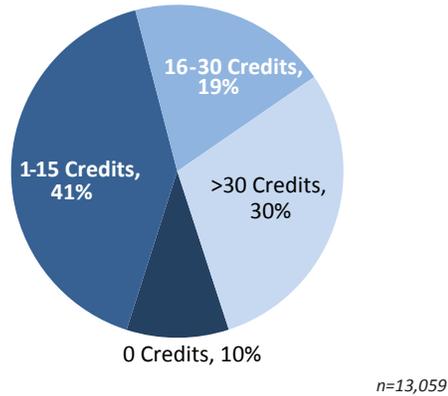
As shown in *Figure 5*, fewer than one-third (30 percent) had more than 30 credits when they left. Although length of time spent in program cannot be inferred from credits earned, one year of full-time enrolment usually translates into 30 credits. A minority of students (10 percent) left without having earned any credits.

Thus two-thirds of leavers departed during the first year of study, a finding that reinforces the growing literature on the first year experience and on the significance of the first semester of study on student retention rates.

III. Grouping Leavers by Perspective

Previous research has shown that most leavers report being satisfied with the education they received, despite not having obtained a credential. Results from this survey confirm this: 84 percent of respondents reported being very satisfied or satisfied with their educational experience. This strongly suggests that a high proportion of respondents had been well-served by the B.C. post-secondary education system. Almost half (46 percent) of respondents did not have "obtain a credential" as a goal when they enrolled, and more than one-third (34 percent) indicated that they stayed as long as originally planned. Regardless of their goals, over half (53 percent) of respondents said they completely or mostly met their goals.
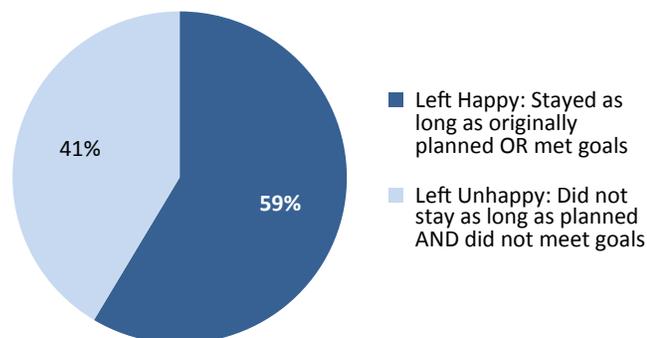
The results corroborate previous studies showing that achieving a degree, diploma, or certificate may not be the reason why students enrol in post-secondary education. For this research to inform policy decisions, it is useful to divide leavers into those who were "well-served" by their post-secondary education experience, and those who were not.

Two key questions were used in this survey to differentiate respondents on the basis of whether they left after realizing their intentions, or left prematurely:

- To what extent did you achieve your goals for enrolling?
- Did you stay at [INSTITUTION] as long as you originally planned?

A subsection of survey questions was asked only of those whose perspective could be described as not having been well-served ("unhappy leavers"): those who neither met their goals nor stayed as long as originally planned. A total of 2,084 respondents (41 percent) met these criteria. For subsequent survey results, comparisons of these two groups ("*Left Happy*" and "*Left Unhappy*") are presented.

Figure 6: Distribution of Leaver Perspective

41%

59%

■ Left Happy: Stayed as long as originally planned OR met goals

■ Left Unhappy: Did not stay as long as planned AND did not meet goals

n=5,036

A. Did Students Stay as Long as Originally Planned?

The responses to this question further emphasize the need to provide multidimensional descriptions of students who do not complete a credential. Respondents said they often left their studies earlier than planned, yet they were frequently satisfied and valued their educational experiences.

Over one third (34 percent) of respondents stayed in their studies as long as they had originally planned. More than half (51 percent) of those who earned more than sixty credits reported having stayed as long as originally planned, and leavers from colleges and institutes were more likely to have stayed as long as planned (40 percent) compared with leavers from universities (see *Figure 7*).

Figure 7: Stayed as Long as Planned by Institution Type

n=5,002
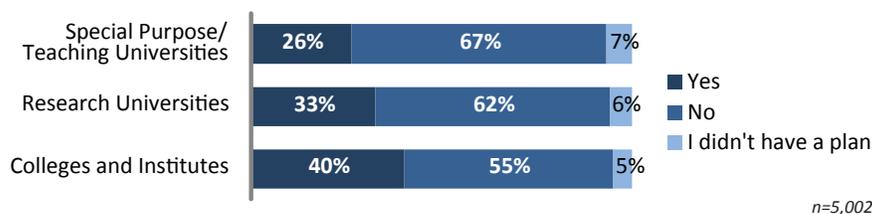
B. Main Educational or Career Goals When First Enrolled

Respondents were asked, "Thinking back to when you first started your studies at [institution], what were your educational or career goals for enrolling?" Multiple responses were permitted. Overall and across all subgroups, the most commonly reported goal was "complete a credential at this institution"—just over half (54 percent) of respondents cited this goal. Of great significance to this study is the finding that almost half the respondents, when they started their studies, had not placed a high value on completing a full program.

The second most popular response was "decide on a career/change careers," which was chosen by 22 percent of respondents overall.

Figure 8: Main Goals for Enrolling by Leaver Perspective

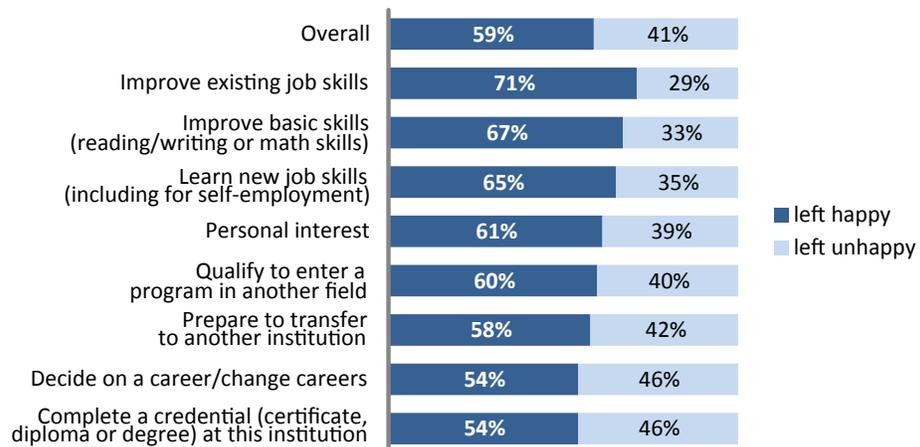|	left happy	left unhappy
Complete a credential (certificate, diploma or degree) at this…	49%	60%
Decide on a career/change careers	20%	25%
Learn new job skills (including for self-employment)	21%	17%
Personal interest	17%	16%
Improve existing job skills	17%	10%
Prepare to transfer to another institution	8%	8%
Qualify to enter a program in another field	7%	7%
Improve basic skills (reading/writing or math skills)	4%	3%
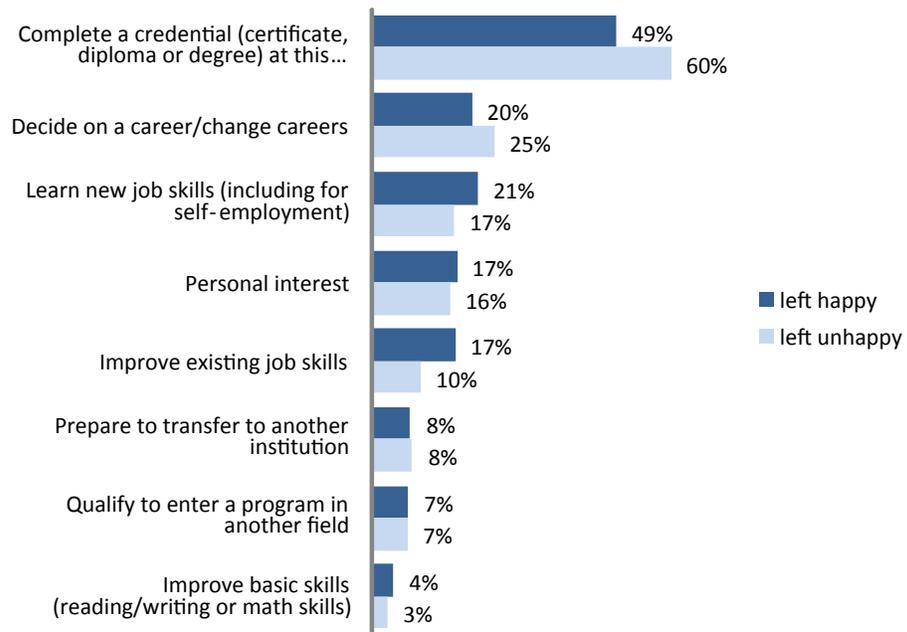
Note: Multiple Responses were permitted. n=4,861

While 49% of those who left happy intended to complete a credential, 60% of those who left unhappy had identified this goal. In general, those who ended up leaving happy were more likely than the unhappy leavers to identify concrete short-term goals, such as "learn new job skills" and "improve existing job skills." Unhappy leavers were more likely to identify less-specific or longer term goals such as "complete a credential" and "decide on a career/change careers."

As shown in *Figure 9*, 71 percent of those who identified "improve existing job skills" as a main goal ended up leaving happy, while only 54 percent of those who identified "complete a credential" left happy.

Figure 9: Main Goal by Leaver Perspective

|	left happy	left unhappy
Overall	59%	41%
Improve existing job skills	71%	29%
Improve basic skills (reading/writing or math skills)	67%	33%
Learn new job skills (including for self-employment)	65%	35%
Personal interest	61%	39%
Qualify to enter a program in another field	60%	40%
Prepare to transfer to another institution	58%	42%
Decide on a career/change careers	54%	46%
Complete a credential (certificate, diploma or degree) at this institution	54%	46%

n=4,861

C. Extent to Which Original Goals Were Met

Students do not necessarily view leaving post-secondary studies without a credential as porblematic. Even though these students had not completed a credential, more than half asserted that they had completely or mostly achieved their goals for enrolling.

Figure 10: Extent to Which Goals Were Met
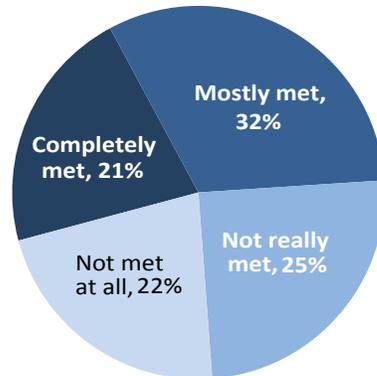
n=4,919

Because respondents could select more than one goal, there is not a one-to-one relationship between goals and the perceived achievement thereof. However, the extent to which goals were achieved is consistently high, regardless of goal(s) selected.

It is important to note that although almost half of those who identified "complete a credential" as a goal said they completely or mostly met their goals, they may have been referring to another goal they selected. The respondents least likely to say they had met their goals were those who selected "decide on a career/change careers" (47 percent).

Goal achievement was more likely for former students of colleges and institutes (59 percent) compared with students from research universities (50 percent) and teaching universities (47 percent).

Leavers who had earned more credits at their time of departure were more likely to say they had met their goals. Among those who left with 0–9 credits, 44 percent reported having met their goals; those who left with between 10 and 59 credits had a 52 percent chance of having met their goals, while of those who left with 60 or more credits, 72 percent reported having met their goals.
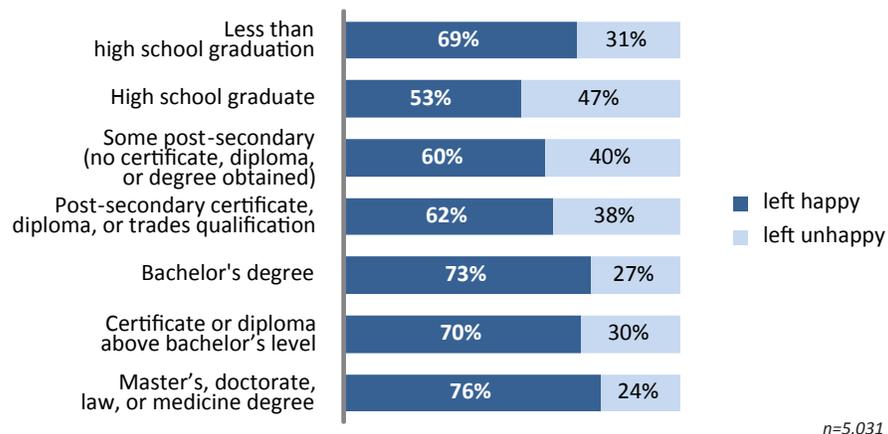
IV. Educational Experiences: Enrolment

A. *Educational Background*

Leavers were asked what their highest level of education was prior to enrolling at the institution they left without a credential. Although results vary slightly by institution type, credential sought, and program area, the most commonly reported previous level of education in every category was *high school graduate* (53 percent). Overall, 27 percent reported having a credential higher than high school graduation before beginning their studies. This varied by leaver type: 32 percent of those who left happy had a higher credential, while only 21 percent of unhappy leavers did.

Those leavers whose previous highest level of education was high school graduate were the least likely to leave happy (53 percent). In general, having a higher level of former educational achievement increased the chances of leaving happy (see *Figure 11*). The exception is those who entered with less than high school graduation, more than two-thirds of whom left happy.

Figure 11: Previous Highest Level of Education by Leaver Perspective

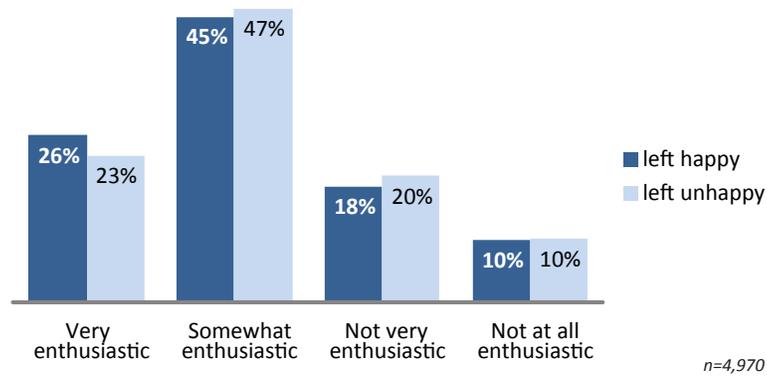|	left happy	left unhappy
Less than high school graduation	69%	31%
High school graduate	53%	47%
Some post-secondary (no certificate, diploma, or degree obtained)	60%	40%
Post-secondary certificate, diploma, or trades qualification	62%	38%
Bachelor's degree	73%	27%
Certificate or diploma above bachelor's level	70%	30%
Master's, doctorate, law, or medicine degree	76%	24%

n=5,031

The socio-economic status of students' families has been shown in the literature to be an important predictor of students' educational achievement. As a rough indicator of this complex measure, respondents provided information on the highest level of education of their most educated parent. Half (50 percent) of respondents who enrolled in research universities had at least one parent with a Bachelor's degree or higher. Respondents from teaching universities (39 percent) and colleges or institutes (36 percent) were less likely to have had a parent with a degree.

B. Commitment to Studies

One hypothesis as to why students might have left post-secondary studies was that they had weak high school preparation for post-secondary studies and carried educational challenges into their post-secondary education. The data did not, however, support this hypothesis.

Respondents were asked how enthusiastic they had been about their high school studies; 71 percent reported having been somewhat or very enthusiastic. This varied somewhat by program area: students in Trades programs were the least likely to report having been enthusiastic (62 percent) while students in Health programs were the most likely (76 percent). Levels of enthusiasm about high school studies were virtually the same whether leavers were happy or unhappy at time of departure from their post-secondary studies.

Figure 12: Enthusiasm About High School Studies by Leaver Perspective

n=4,970

When asked how enthusiastic they had been about their studies when first enrolled at the institution, those who left unhappy were more likely to have been unenthusiastic (8 percent) than those who left happy (4 percent). However, these percentages are both low—overall, 94 percent of respondents said they had been somewhat or very enthusiastic. Regardless of program area, students overwhelmingly reported having been enthusiastic when starting.

Figure 13: Levels of Enthusiasm When Starting
Post-secondary Studies by Leaver Perspective

n=5,026
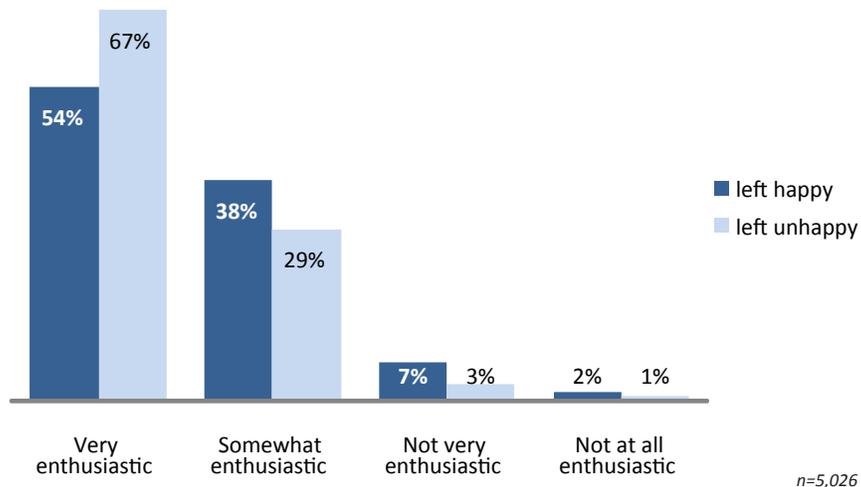
Respondents who were not enthusiastic at the outset of their studies were more likely to be male (48 percent) than were the enthusiastic starters (40 percent). They were more likely to be younger (see *Figure 14*), and not surprisingly were more likely to have obtained fewer credits (see *Figure 15*).

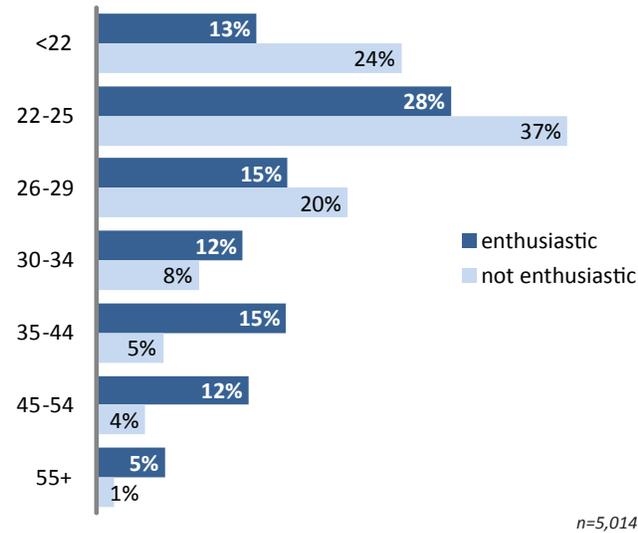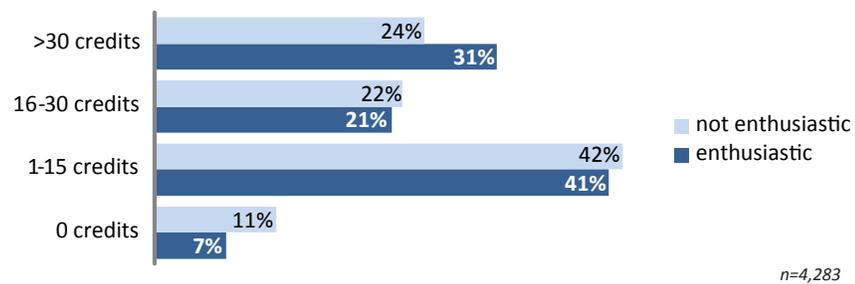*Figure 14: Age Range by Initial Enthusiasm for Studies*

n=5,014

Figure 15: Earned Credits by Initial Enthusiasm for Studies

n=4,283

C. Clarity on Reasons for Enrolling, Which Courses to Take

Another expectation about students' departure from post-secondary studies was that even though they were motivated at the beginning of their studies, they were unfocussed or unclear as to what to study. Once again, the survey results do not support this idea, but there are a few hints that a lack of clarity was a contributing factor.

Nine out of ten respondents (90 percent) reported having been very or somewhat clear on their reasons for enrolling when they started their studies.
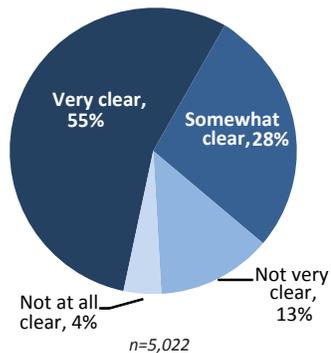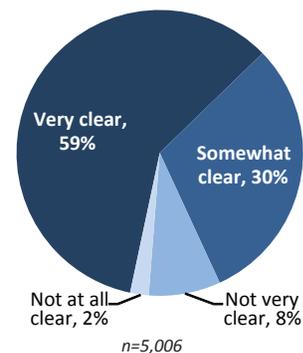
Figure 16:
Clarity on Which Courses to Take

Very clear, 55%
Somewhat clear, 28%
Not very clear, 13%
Not at all clear, 4%
n=5,022

Figure 17:
Clarity on Reasons for Enrolling

Very clear, 59%
Somewhat clear, 30%
Not very clear, 8%
Not at all clear, 2%
n=5,006

Students who left happy were more likely to have been clear or very clear on reasons for enrolling (93 percent) than were those who left unhappy (85 percent). Clarity on which courses to take differed even more: 88 percent of those who left happy had been very or somewhat clear on their reasons for enrolling, while only 75 percent of unhappy leavers had been clear.

Figure 18: Lack of Clarity When Starting Studies by Leaver Perspective

25%
12%
15%
7%

left happy
left unhappy

unclear on which courses to take
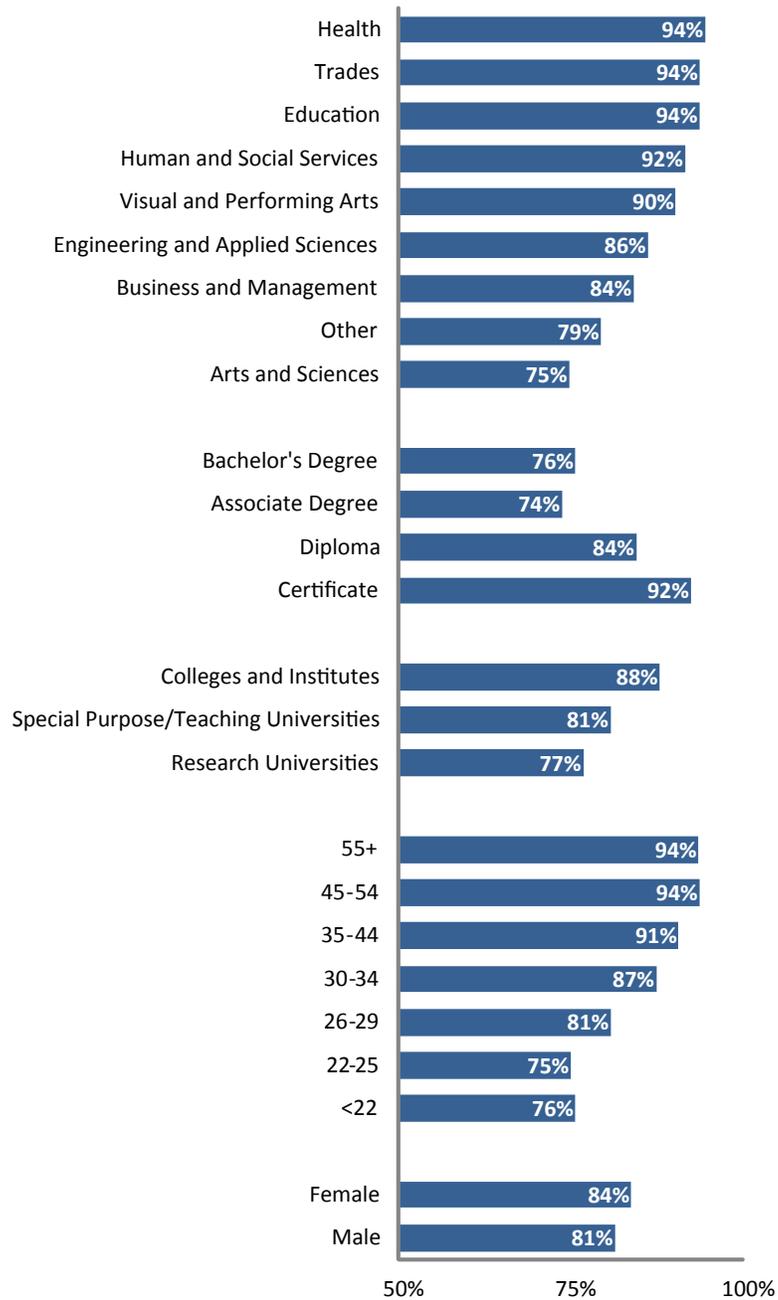n=5,022

unclear on reasons for enrolling
n=5,006
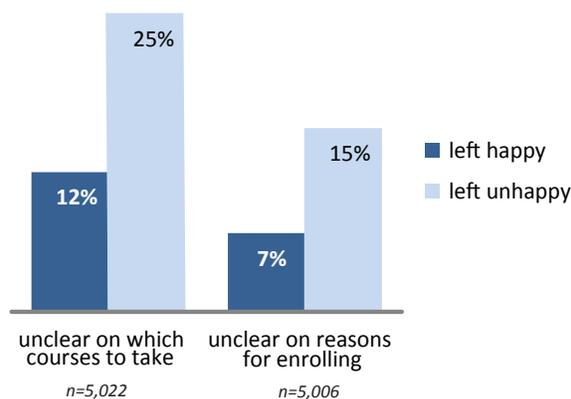
Looked at another way, almost two-thirds (63 percent) of those who were clear on which courses to take ended up leaving happy, while only 40 percent of those who were unclear on which courses to take left happy.

Leavers from the more applied program areas, such as Health (94 percent), Trades (94 percent), and Education (94 percent) were more likely to have been clear about which courses to take, but all the program areas except one were more than 84 percent likely to report having been very or somewhat clear. Among respondents from Arts and Sciences programs—which comprise 43 percent of the cohort—three-quarters (75 percent) reported having been very or somewhat clear on which courses to take.

This may explain why respondents from research universities and teaching universities were less likely to report having had clarity around choosing courses; half of their leavers were in Arts and Sciences programs. The results are similar by credential: those pursuing Certificates

(92 percent) and Diplomas (84 percent) were much more likely than those pursuing Associate Degrees (74 percent) or Bachelor's Degrees (76 percent) to have been clear on which courses to take (see *Figure 19*). Sixty percent of those pursuing Bachelor's Degrees were in Arts and Sciences, as were almost all leavers in Associate Degree programs (99 percent).

Figure 19: Very/Somewhat Clear on Which Courses to Take

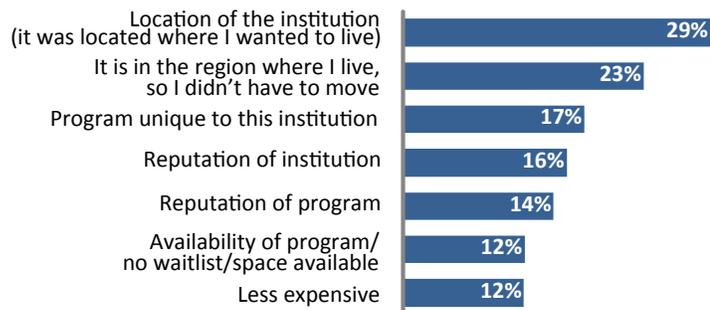| Category	Percent
Health	94%
Trades	94%
Education	94%
Human and Social Services	92%
Visual and Performing Arts	90%
Engineering and Applied Sciences	86%
Business and Management	84%
Other	79%
Arts and Sciences	75%
Bachelor's Degree	76%
Associate Degree	74%
Diploma	84%
Certificate	92%
Colleges and Institutes	88%
Special Purpose/Teaching Universities	81%
Research Universities	77%
55+	94%
45-54	94%
35-44	91%
30-34	87%
26-29	81%
22-25	75%
<22	76%
Female	84%
Male	81%

D. Reasons for Choosing Institution

Overall, 79 percent of respondents indicated that the institution they attended had been their first choice, and this was remarkably consistent across leaver type, program areas, institution types, age ranges, and gender. Of those who said the institution they left was not their first choice, 77 percent reported their first choice was another institution in B.C.

Respondents were asked why they chose to attend the institution they left, rather than another institution. Up to three responses were permitted; *Figure 20* shows the percentage of respondents who cited each reason.

Figure 20: Most Frequently Cited Reasons for Choosing Institution

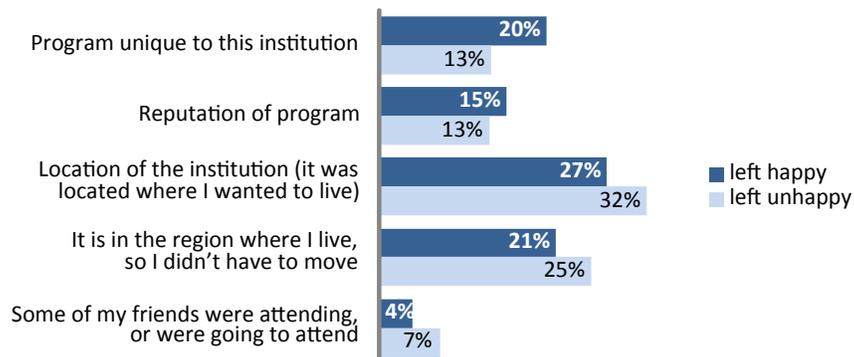| Reason	Percentage
Location of the institution (it was located where I wanted to live)	29%
It is in the region where I live, so I didn't have to move	23%
Program unique to this institution	17%
Reputation of institution	16%
Reputation of program	14%
Availability of program/ no waitlist/space available	12%
Less expensive	12%

n=4,998

Location of the institution was the most commonly cited reason for institutional selection. Over half (51 percent) cited either "located where I wanted to live" or "not having to move" (or both) as reasons for their choice. The five next most commonly cited reasons are shown in *Figure 20.*

Less commonly cited reasons were "transferability of programs or courses," "online/distance option available," "length/schedule of program," "friends at institution," "small institution or class size," "sent by employer," "campus life," and "not having been accepted elsewhere."

There were some differences between happy and unhappy leavers. Those who left happy were more likely to have chosen their institution based on reputation or uniqueness of program, while unhappy leavers were more likely to have made their decision based on the location of the institution or because they had friends there (see *Figure 21*).

### Figure 21: Reasons for Choosing Institution by Leaver Perspective

Reason	left happy	left unhappy
Program unique to this institution	20%	13%
Reputation of program	15%	13%
Location of the institution (it was located where I wanted to live)	27%	32%
It is in the region where I live, so I didn't have to move	21%	25%
Some of my friends were attending, or were going to attend	4%	7%

n=4,920

V. Educational Experiences: Quality

A. Quality of Services

Leavers were asked to rate the quality of services and aspects of student life on a five-point scale, from very good to very poor. Ratings were consistently high across program area and institution type, though there were differences by leaver perspective.

Figure 22: Quality of Services and Student Life, All Leavers
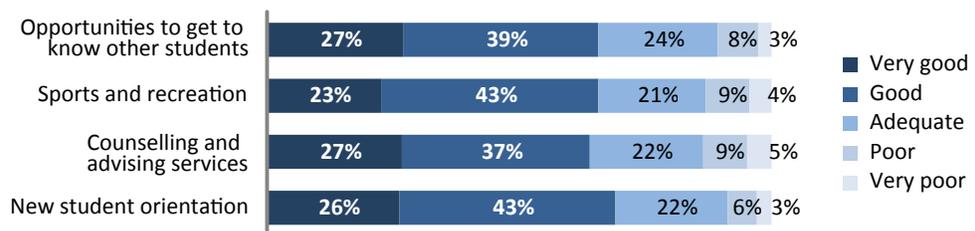
Note: excludes "Not applicable" responses

Although most students rated the quality of services and student life positively, there were some differences between happy and unhappy leavers. Unhappy leavers were more likely to rate quality as poor or very poor (see *Figure 23*).

Figure 23: Services Rated Poor or Very Poor by Leaver Perspective
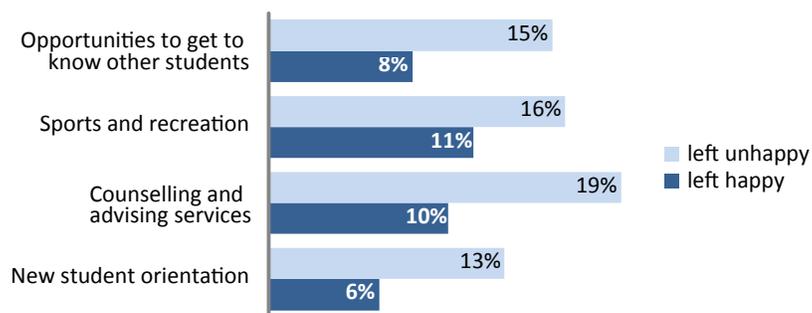
Note: excludes "Not applicable" responses

Unhappy leavers from research universities were less likely to give poor ratings to "sports and recreation" compared with leavers from other institution types, but they were more likely to rate counselling and advising services as poor (see *Figure 24*).

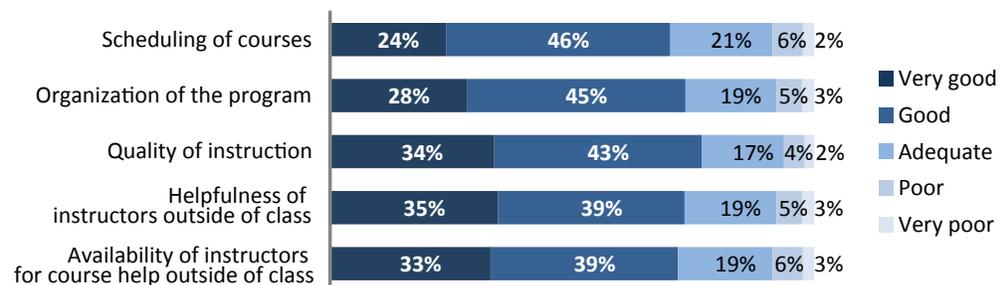*Figure 24: Services Rated as Poor or Very Poor by Institution Type, Unhappy Leavers*
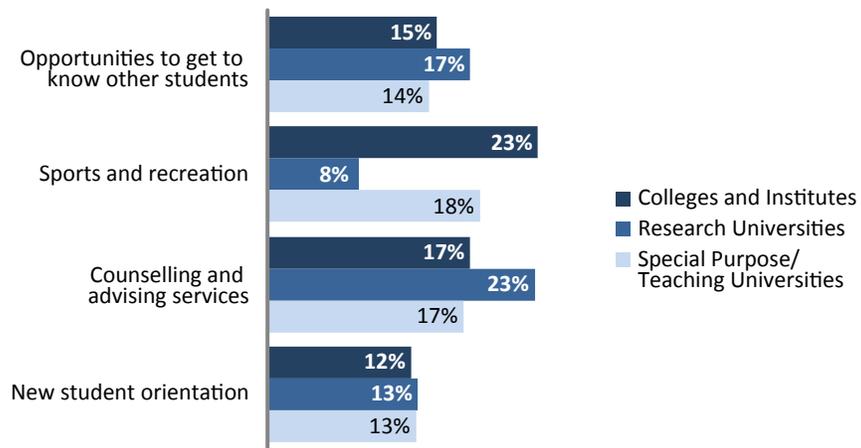
Note: excludes "Not applicable" responses

B. Quality of Courses

Of great significance for institutions, ratings of course quality are similar to ratings of services, with all areas rated good or very good by a majority of respondents. More than three-quarters of leavers (77 percent) gave high ratings to quality of instruction.
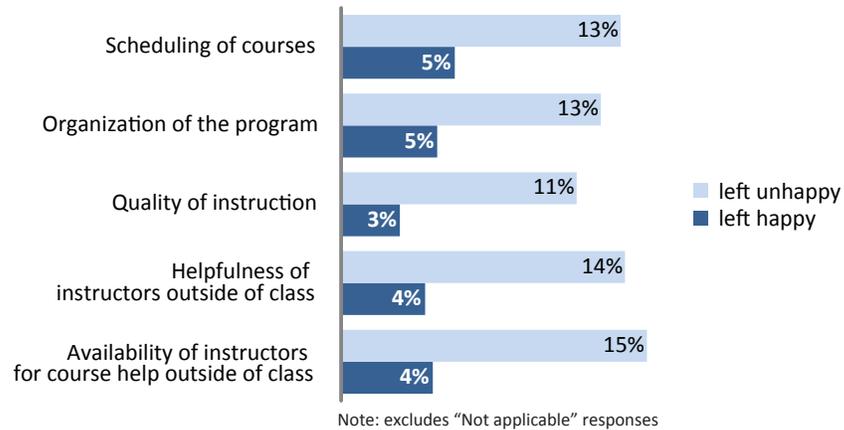
Figure 25: Quality of Courses, All Leavers

Note: excludes "Not applicable" responses

In rating the quality of courses, the differences between happy leavers and unhappy leavers are even more pronounced.
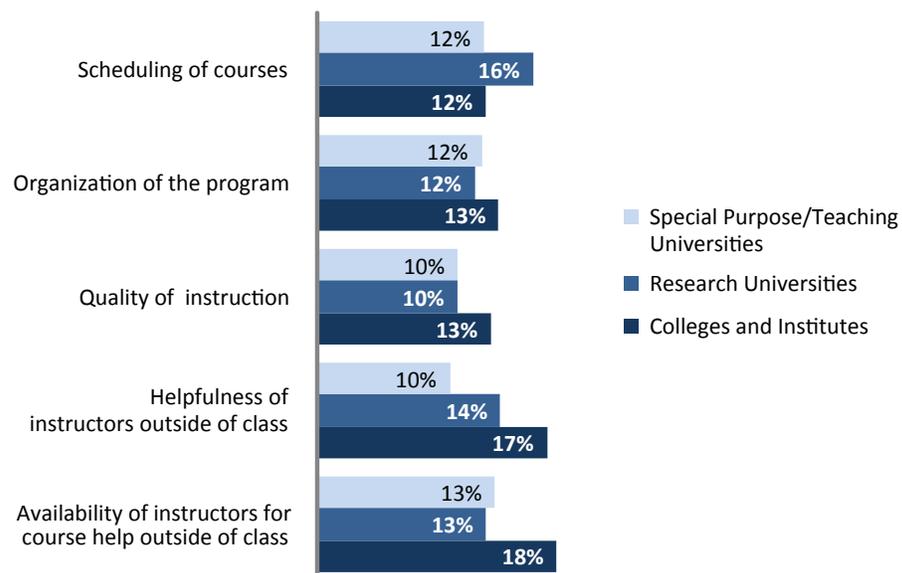
Figure 26: Aspects of Courses Rated as Poor or Very poor by Leaver Perspective

Scheduling of courses
- left unhappy: 13%
- left happy: 5%

Organization of the program
- left unhappy: 13%
- left happy: 5%

Quality of instruction
- left unhappy: 11%
- left happy: 3%

Helpfulness of instructors outside of class
- left unhappy: 14%
- left happy: 4%

Availability of instructors for course help outside of class
- left unhappy: 15%
- left happy: 4%

Note: excludes "Not applicable" responses

Unhappy leavers were about three times as likely as happy leavers to give *low* ratings (poor or very poor) to different aspects of their courses. Even among unhappy leavers, however, 15 percent or fewer gave low ratings to any of the measures. Helpfulness (14 percent) and availability of instructors outside of class (15 percent) were the measures most likely to be rated poor or very poor.

College and institute unhappy leavers were more likely than university unhappy leavers to give a low rating to helpfulness and availability of instructors outside of class (see *Figure 27*). Unhappy leavers from research universities were more likely than those from other types of institutions to rate course scheduling as poor or very poor.

Figure 27: Courses rated ad poor or very poor by Institution Type, unhappy leavers

Scheduling of courses
- Special Purpose/Teaching Universities: 12%
- Research Universities: 16%
- Colleges and Institutes: 12%

Organization of the program
- Special Purpose/Teaching Universities: 12%
- Research Universities: 12%
- Colleges and Institutes: 13%

Quality of instruction
- Special Purpose/Teaching Universities: 10%
- Research Universities: 10%
- Colleges and Institutes: 13%

Helpfulness of instructors outside of class
- Special Purpose/Teaching Universities: 10%
- Research Universities: 14%
- Colleges and Institutes: 17%

Availability of instructors for course help outside of class
- Special Purpose/Teaching Universities: 13%
- Research Universities: 13%
- Colleges and Institutes: 18%

C. Took Remedial Courses

Fifteen percent of respondents had taken upgrading or remedial courses to strengthen their skills in math, writing, or reading; however, this was not related to whether or not a student left happy. Those who had taken upgrading or remedial courses were slightly more likely to have stopped attending during their last term (62 percent) than those who had not taken such courses (56 percent). There were also differences by institution type: with research universities about half as likely (8 percent) as colleges and institutes (16 percent) and teaching universities (20 percent) to have had students enrolled in such courses.

D. Extent to Which Students Felt a Sense of Belonging

Over the past two decades, the extent to which students have integrated into the academic and social milieus of their institutions has been an important theme in understanding student success. The survey confirmed the relevance of the topic of student engagement.

Students who left happy were almost twice as likely to have felt a sense of belonging "to a great extent" (22 percent) compared with students who left unhappy (13 percent). Conversely, students who left unhappy were almost twice as likely to say they did not feel a sense of belonging: 22 percent of unhappy leavers versus 12 percent of happy leavers said they felt a sense of belonging "to no extent at all." Overall, 59 percent of leavers felt a sense of belonging at least to some extent.

Figure 28: Leavers' Sense of Belonging by Leaver Perspective


n=4,831
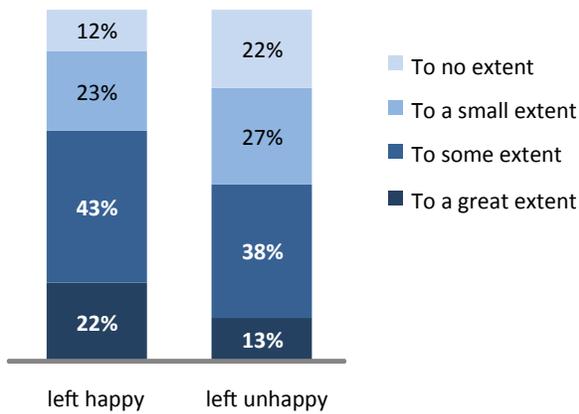
E. Level of Course Difficulty

The following results, combined with subsequent findings as to whether respondents had achieved the grades they expected, suggest that academic difficulties were not a major reason for not completing a credential.

Almost half of those surveyed (49 percent) said that their courses were "neither difficult nor easy," and very few rated the level of course difficulty as "very easy" or "very difficult." Students were about twice as likely to rate their courses difficult as they were to rate them easy, and there was little variation by institution type, program area, or leaver type (see *Figure 29*).

Figure 29: Level of Course Difficulty by Leaver Perspective


n=4,981
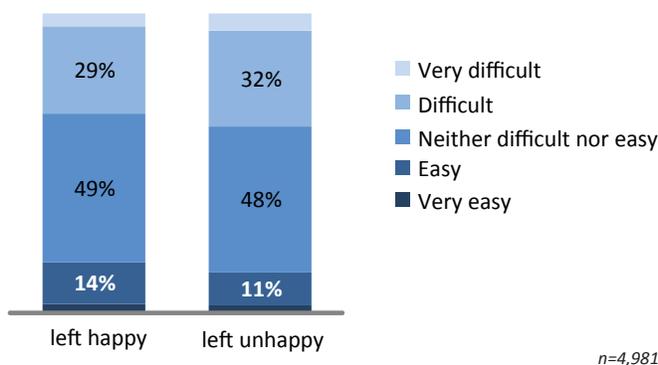
F. Overall Satisfaction with Education Received

For institutions to improve, survey results suggest that fine tuning rather than wholesale change may be the best approach. The results also suggest cautious use of credential rates as a measure of institutional performance.

Despite having left without a credential, 84 percent of leavers reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the education they received. Even among unhappy leavers—those who left without achieving goals and earlier than they had planned—over two-thirds (69 percent) left satisfied (though they were much less likely, at 13 percent, to have been "very satisfied" than were happy leavers, at 37 percent). This, coupled with the other ratings discussed above, suggests that attrition may be largely unavoidable—the majority of leavers surveyed were satisfied to depart without a degree, diploma, or certificate.

Figure 30: Overall Satisfaction by Leaver Perspective

n=4,914
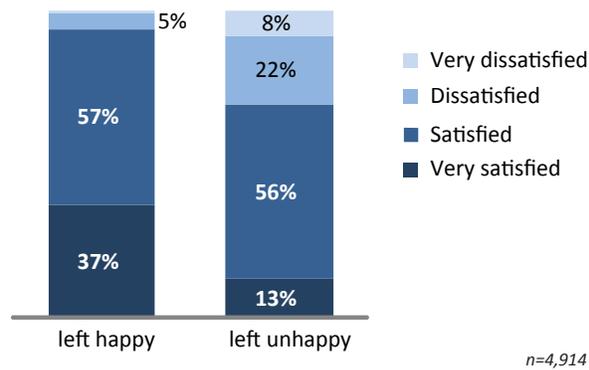
G. What Leavers Found Most Valuable

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide open-ended answers to the question "What was most valuable to you about being a student at [INSTITUTION]?" While there was a lot of variation, common themes occurred throughout the comments.

The quality of instruction or instructors was cited most often as being of value (12 percent); this is not surprising since it was rated the highest of the "quality of courses" elements. This varied only slightly by leaver type, with 11 percent of unhappy leavers and 13 percent of happy leavers finding quality of instruction most valuable. Some examples:

> *I liked the type of instruction and how they presented it.*
>
> *The teachers were really friendly and accommodating.*
>
> *Most valuable about being a student was the mentorship from the instructors.*
>
> *The availability of the teachers, the quality of instructors and that they are genuinely interested in the students.*

Other factors deemed valuable by respondents included skills and knowledge gained from studies (11 percent) and making contacts and friends (10 percent).

VI. Educational Experiences: Departure

The questions analyzed in this section were asked only of those who left unhappy—that is, those who neither stayed as long as originally planned nor accomplished their main goals. Removing the happy leavers and focussing on the unhappy leavers allowed the study to identify how institutions might focus their activities to improve retention.

A. Were Grades as Expected?

Overall, slightly more than half of unhappy leavers (51 percent) said their grades were as expected, more than a third (38 percent) had lower than expected grades, and 11 percent had higher than expected grades. There was little difference by the type of institution or the number of earned credits a student had at time of departure.

Figure 31: Were Grades as Expected
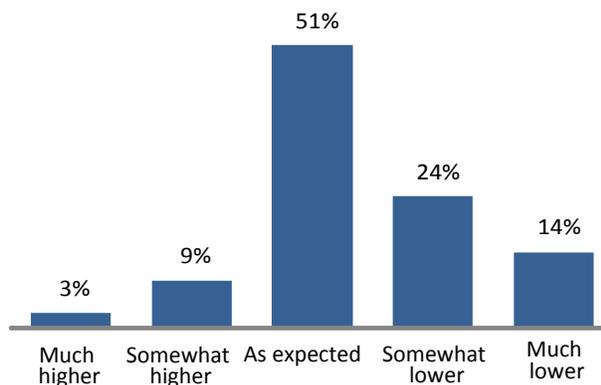
Note: Percentages are based on unhappy leavers: those who did not stay as long as planned and did not achieve their main goals. n=1,986
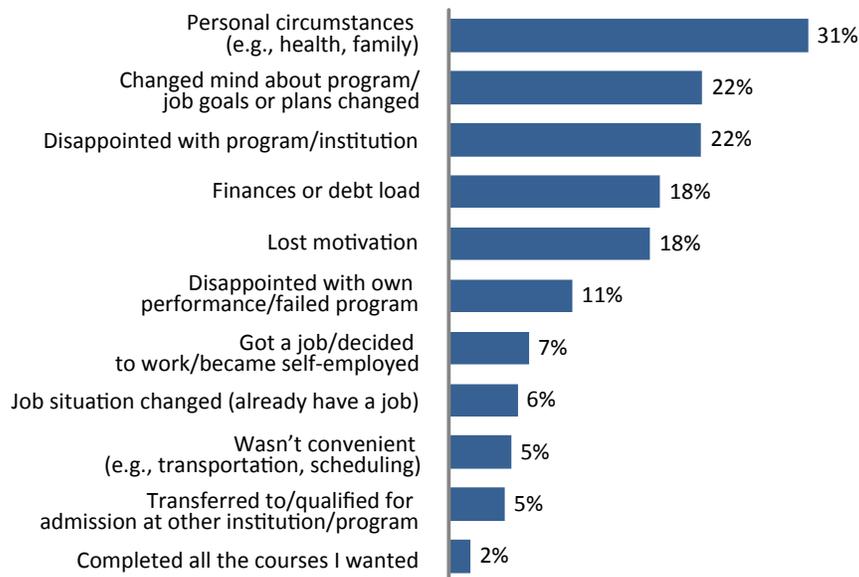
B. Dropping Out

Among unhappy leavers, more than half (57 percent) stopped attending classes during their last term. A majority (58 percent) of those who stopped attending mid-term did so without informing anyone at the institution—e.g. an instructor, counsellor, or administrator—about their decision.

C. Main Reasons for Leaving

Those who left unhappy cited a wide variety of reasons for leaving when they did, the most common being "personal circumstances (e.g., health, family)" (31 percent) and "changed mind about program/job goals or plans changed" (22 percent). Less than one-quarter (22 percent) attributed their departure to "disappointed with program/institution." *Figure 32* shows reasons provided by unhappy leavers; multiple responses were allowed.

Figure 32: Reasons for Leaving

| Reason	Percentage
Personal circumstances (e.g., health, family)	31%
Changed mind about program/job goals or plans changed	22%
Disappointed with program/institution	22%
Finances or debt load	18%
Lost motivation	18%
Disappointed with own performance/failed program	11%
Got a job/decided to work/became self-employed	7%
Job situation changed (already have a job)	6%
Wasn't convenient (e.g., transportation, scheduling)	5%
Transferred to/qualified for admission at other institution/program	5%
Completed all the courses I wanted	2%

Note: Percentages are based on unhappy leavers: those who did not stay as long as planned and did not achieve their main goals. Multiple responses were allowed.

Results varied little by institution type, although leavers from research universities were more likely (21 percent) than leavers from colleges and institutes (16 percent) or teaching universities (19 percent) to cite "finances or debt load" as a reason for leaving.

Reasons for leaving were also fairly consistent regardless of the number of earned credits students had at their time of departure. Leavers with more credits were more likely to cite "lost motivation," "debt load," "disappointed with own performance," "disappointed with program/institution" and "transferred to/qualified for admission at other institution/program" (see *Figure 33*). The differences by credit range are small, except for "transferred to/qualified for admission at other institution/program" which was much more likely to be cited by leavers with more credits. Short-stay leavers—those who left with only 0–9 credits—were more likely (34 percent) than other leavers (29 percent) to cite "personal circumstances (e.g. health, family)" as a reason for early departure.

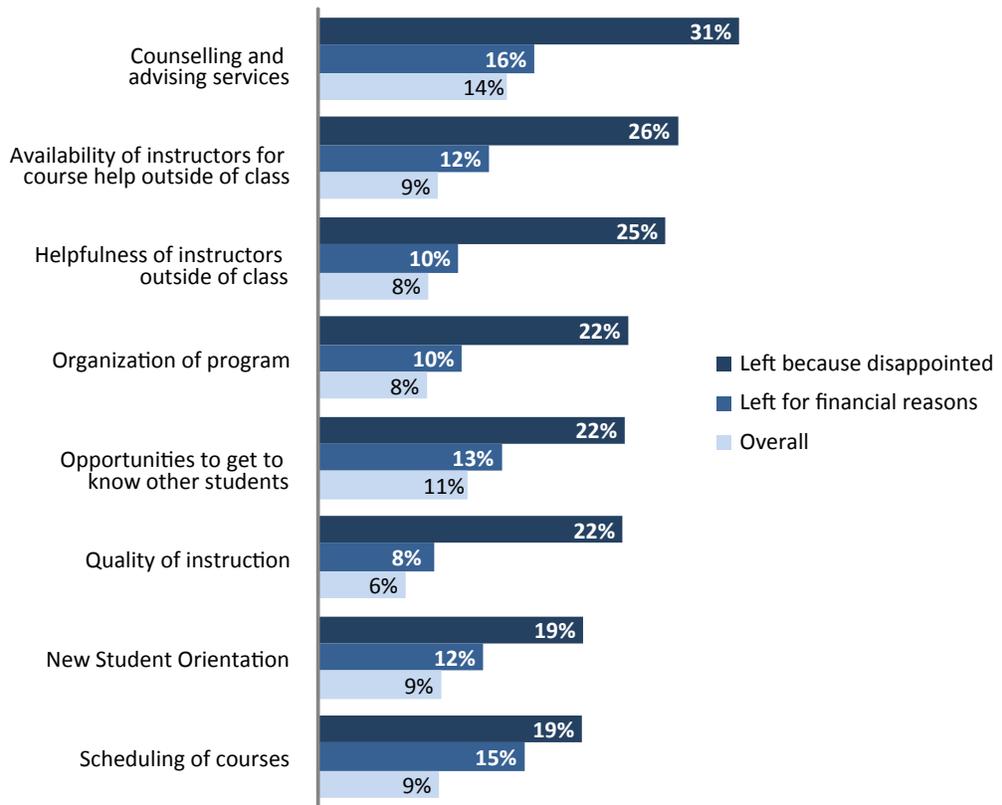*Figure 33: Commonly Cited Reasons for Leaving by Earned Credit Range*
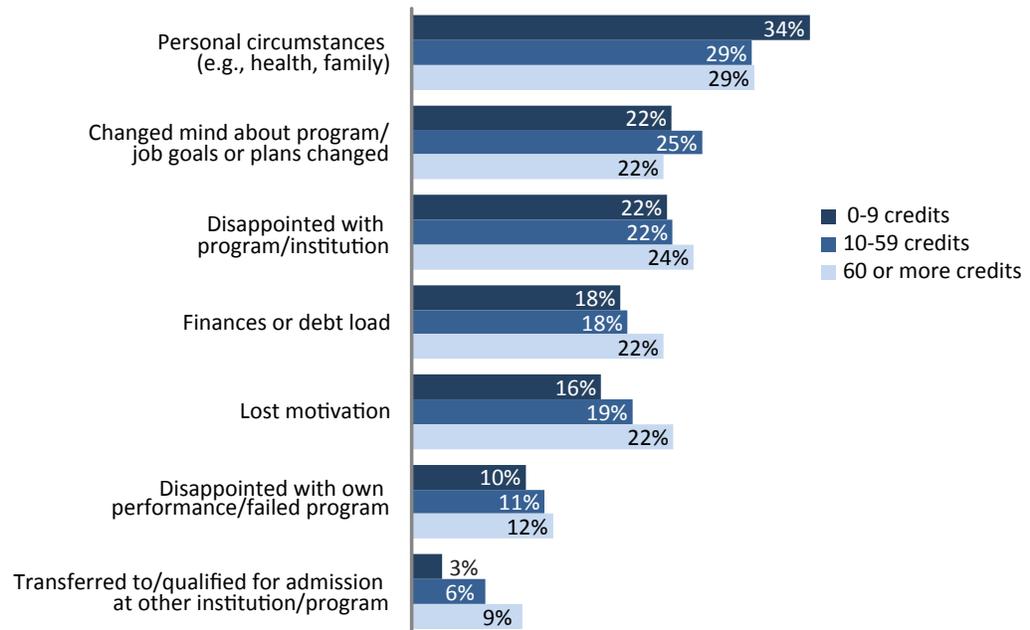
Note: Percentages are based on unhappy leavers: those who did not stay as long as planned and did not achieve their main goals. Multiple responses were allowed.

The results suggest that a large group of unhappy leavers left due to circumstances beyond the institutions' direct control. However, it is useful to examine subgroups of unhappy leavers for whom action might have been taken. Over half of unhappy leavers (54 percent; n=1,116) identified financial reasons, disappointment with own performance or institution, or lack of motivation as reasons for leaving. These students differed from other leavers in important ways. Selected results for two subgroups appear in *Figure 34*, compared with overall results. The two subgroups are:

- Left because disappointed: Reason for leaving was lack of motivation, disappointment in program, institution, or own performance (n=848)
- Left for financial reasons: Reason for leaving was finances or debt load (n=382)

Note that the subgroups are not exclusive because some respondents appear in both groups.

Figure 34: Services Rated Poor by Reason for Leaving

Note: Percentages are based on unhappy leavers: those who did not stay as long as planned and did not achieve their main goals. Multiple responses were allowed.

Both subgroups were more likely than the overall group to give poor ratings to services. Of those who left disappointed, almost one third (31 percent) rated counselling and advising services as poor. About one-quarter of this group (26 percent) also rated availability and helpfulness of instructors outside of class as poor. The issue appears to be a lack of engagement: almost two-thirds (62 percent) of those who left disappointed felt a sense of belonging to no extent or to a small extent (see *Figure 35*).
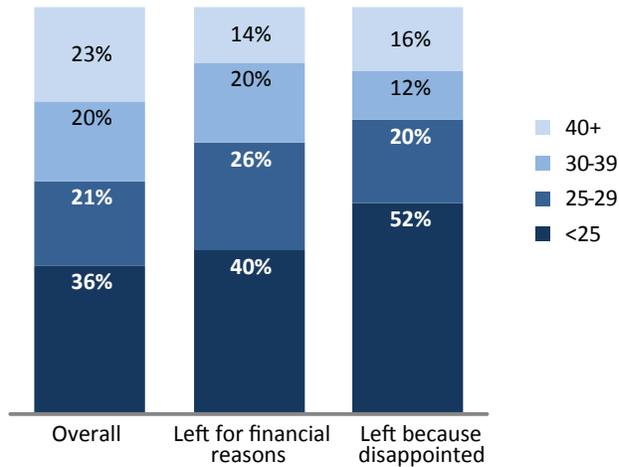
Figure 35: Felt a Sense of Belonging by Reason for Leaving
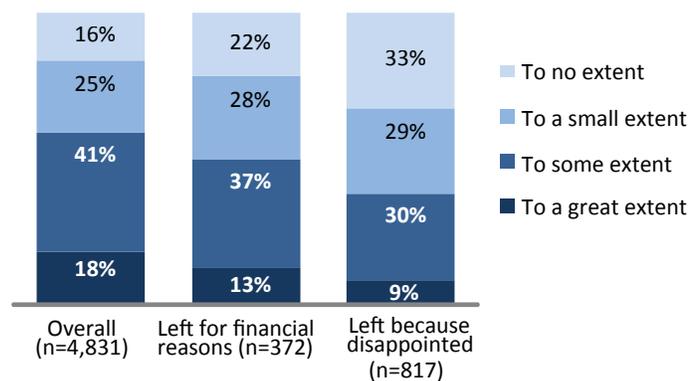
Note: Percentages are based on unhappy leavers: those who did not stay as long as planned and did not achieve their main goals. Multiple responses were allowed.

More than half (52 percent) of those who left because they were disappointed were under the age of 25 at the time of the survey, and those who left for financial reasons were also younger on average than the overall group (see *Figure 36*).
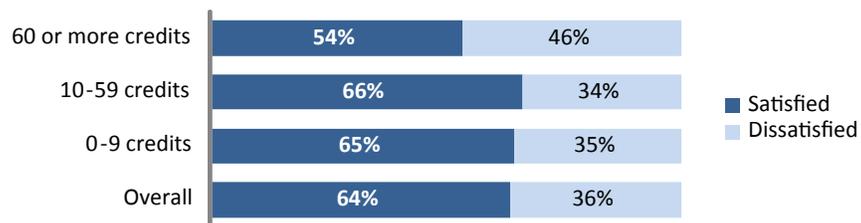
Figure 36: Age by Reason for Leaving

Note: Percentages are based on unhappy leavers: those who did not stay as long as planned and did not achieve their main goals. Multiple responses were allowed.

D. Satisfaction with Decision to Leave

Those who left for financial reasons had a median student loan of $12,000 when they left (with loans ranging from $1,500 to $50,000) compared with an overall median loan of $11,000 (and loans ranging from $100 to $120,000). Those who departed with sixty or more credits were more likely to be dissatisfied with their decision to leave (see *Figure 37*).

Figure 37: Satisfaction with Decision to Leave by Earned Credits Range

Note: Percentages are based on unhappy leavers: those who did not stay as long as planned and did not achieve their main goals.

E. Extent to Which Factors Would Have Increased Length of Stay

In order to determine what, if anything, institutions might do to encourage prospective leavers to stay through to credential completion, unhappy leavers were asked what would have influenced them to stay longer. The two factors most likely to have influenced unhappy leavers to stay longer were both finance-related: 48 percent said that "not having to work at
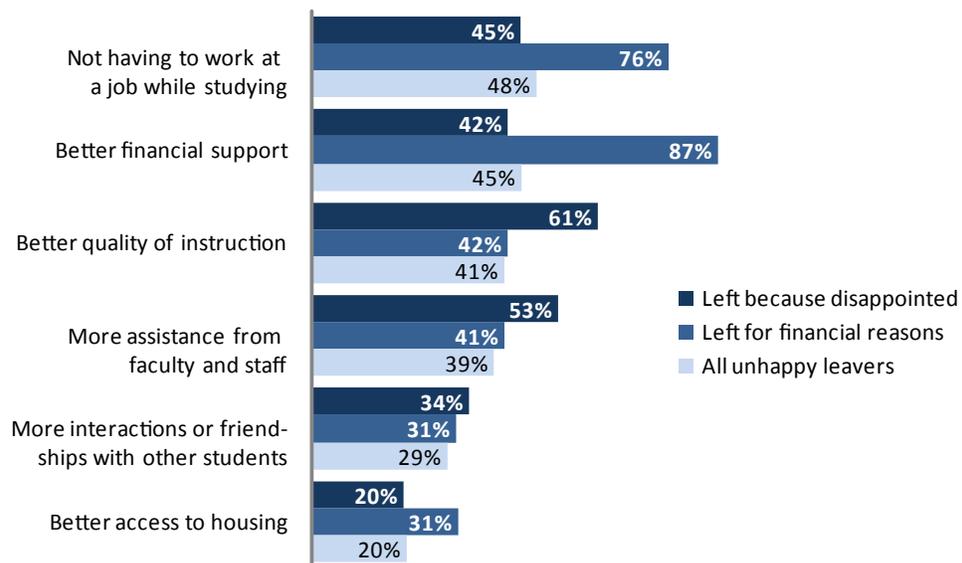
a job while studying" would have influenced them to stay, and 45 percent said that "better financial support" would have. Factors involving courses were also selected frequently: "more relevant coursework" (44 percent), "better quality of instruction" (41 percent), and "greater choice of courses" (41 percent).

For some of these factors, there are differences by reason for leaving (see *Figure 38*). Those who left because they were disappointed in themselves, their program or their institution, and those who left for financial reasons might have been retained, so it is important to note their reasons for leaving and how they vary from the reasons of unhappy leavers overall.

Almost nine out of ten (87 percent) of those who left for financial reasons said they might have stayed longer had there been "better financial support," while only 45 percent of all unhappy leavers cited this reason. This group was also much more likely to cite "not having to work at a job while studying" (76 percent) than were unhappy leavers overall.

More than half of those who left disappointed said that better quality of instruction (61 percent) and more assistance from faculty and staff (53 percent) may have influenced them to stay longer.

Figure 38: Factors That Would Have Influenced
*Unhappy Leavers to Stay Longer by Reason for Leaving*

Factor	Left because disappointed	Left for financial reasons	All unhappy leavers
Not having to work at a job while studying	45%	76%	48%
Better financial support	42%	87%	45%
Better quality of instruction	61%	42%	41%
More assistance from faculty and staff	53%	41%	39%
More interactions or friendships with other students	34%	31%	29%
Better access to housing	20%	31%	20%

VII. Financial Assistance

A. *Extent to Which Financial Issues Influenced Students to Leave*

Although 60 percent of unhappy leavers cited "better financial support" or "not having to work" (or both) as factors that might have influenced them to stay longer, less than one-third of leavers overall (32 percent) said that financial problems influenced their decision to leave "to a great extent" (16 percent) or "to some extent" (16 percent). However, 39 percent of those who left unhappy were influenced to leave by financial factors (see *Figure 39*), while only 27 percent of happy leavers were.

Figure 39: Financial Problems Influenced Students to Leave by Leaver Perspective
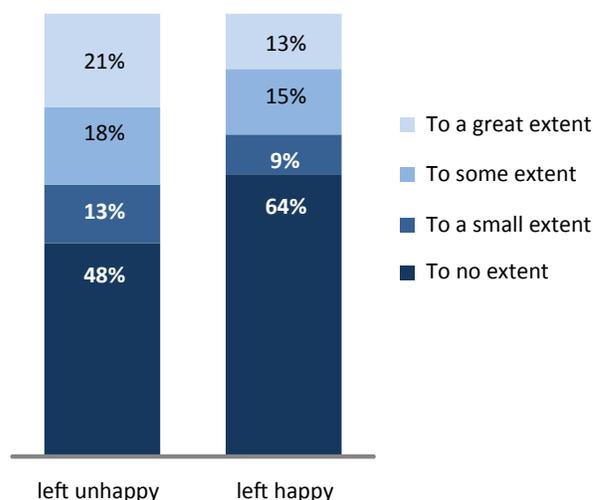

B. *Government Student Loans*

Having received government student loans while attending was not related to whether or not students left happy or unhappy: in both groups, only 23 percent of leavers had received such loans. Leavers from research universities were more likely to have received government loans (29 percent) than were leavers from colleges and institutes (19 percent) or teaching-intensive universities (23 percent).

Students who left with sixty or more credits were much more likely to have received government student loans than other leavers (see *Figure 40*).

Figure 40: Received Student Loans While at Institution
by Earned Credits

n=4,284
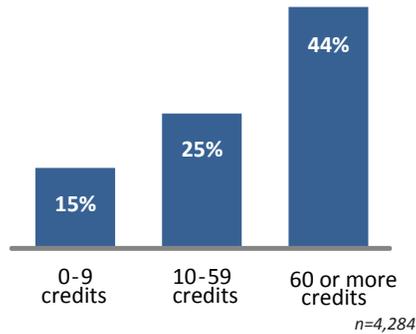
For those who did receive student loans, the median amount borrowed was $13,900. Median amount borrowed varied by credential type, likely due to differences in program length (see *Table 3*).

Table 3: Median Student Loan Incurred by Credential Type

Bachelor's Degree	$16,000	n=461
Associate Degree	$8,000	n=82
Diploma	$10,000	n=274
Certificate	$8,000	n=207

C. Main Sources of Financial Support While Studying

Leavers were asked to name up to three primary sources of financial support upon which they relied while pursuing their studies. By far the most common source cited was "employment" (63 percent), followed by "family or friends' support" (33 percent). The only other sources cited by more than 10 percent of the respondents were "government student loans" (17 percent) and "personal savings, investments, RESPs" (15 percent).

Figure 41: Main Sources of Financial Support
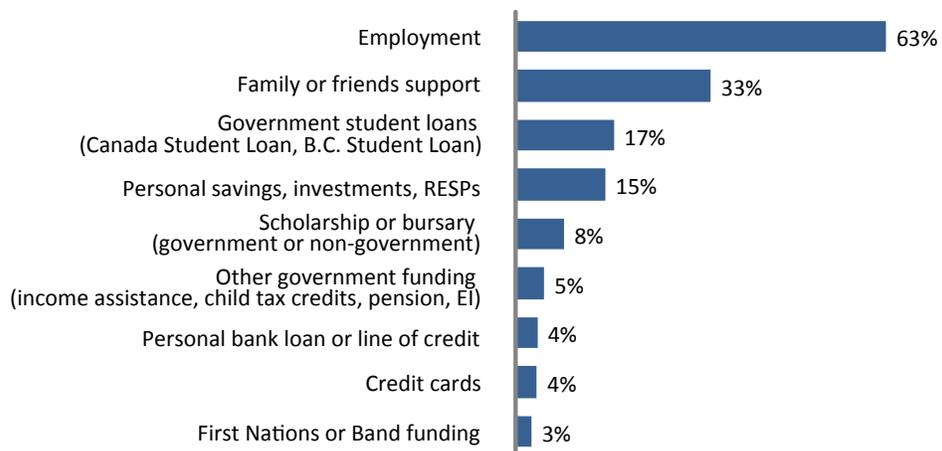
Note: Multiple responses were permitted

n=4,997

Results varied little by whether or not students left happy, although unhappy leavers were more likely (38 percent) to have relied on the support of friends or family than were happy leavers (30 percent).

VIII. Subsequent Education

That many respondents to this survey were pursuing further studies within two years of having left is additional evidence that they should not be considered drop-outs.

Overall, 42 percent of all leavers surveyed were either enrolled in further education or training at the time of the survey (25 percent) or had been enrolled since departing their B.C. public institution (17 percent). Almost two-thirds (63 percent) of leavers who went on to further education did so in B.C. There was no difference in these results by leaver type.

When asked to name the institution attended, many leavers specified a B.C. public institution. Although best efforts were made to exclude these cases from the active cohort prior to surveying, possible reasons for their inclusion include:
- Leavers may have enrolled after the cohort was drawn but prior to data collection
- Leavers may have enrolled in continuing education programs

A majority (61 percent) of those who went on to further education said that their studies were very or somewhat related to the studies they were pursuing at the institution they left. Happy leavers were more likely to have pursued related studies (see *Figure 42*).

Figure 42: Relatedness of Further Education to Abandoned Studies by Leaver Perspective

n=2,108
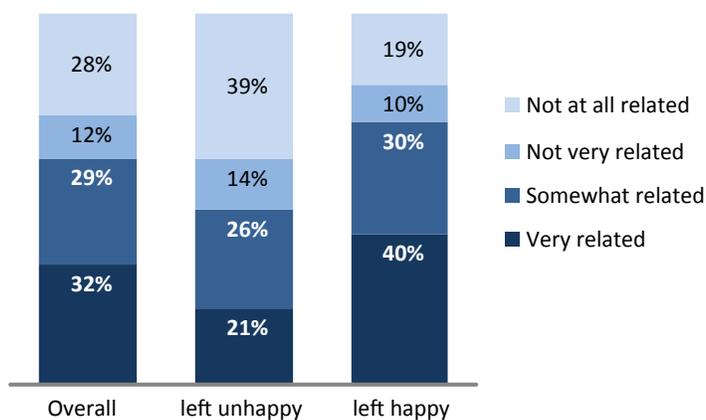
Those not enrolled in further education at the time of the survey were asked "How likely are you to enrol in a post-secondary institution in the next two years?" About two-thirds (66 percent) said they were somewhat or very likely to enrol. This finding is consistent with those of other studies that students tend to be persistent, even if their rate of progress is slow in some cases.

*Figure 43: Likelihood of Enrolling in Further Education in Next Two Years*
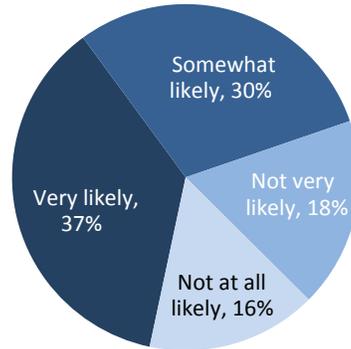
Note: percentages are based on those not currently enrolled; n=3,705

IX. Subsequent Employment

A. *Main Activity During First Four Months After Departure*

By far the most common main activity in the four months after leaving post-secondary studies was "working," cited by over two-thirds of all leavers (68 percent). Other activities included "looking for work" and "studying at a different institution."

*Figure 44: Main Activity*

n=4,985
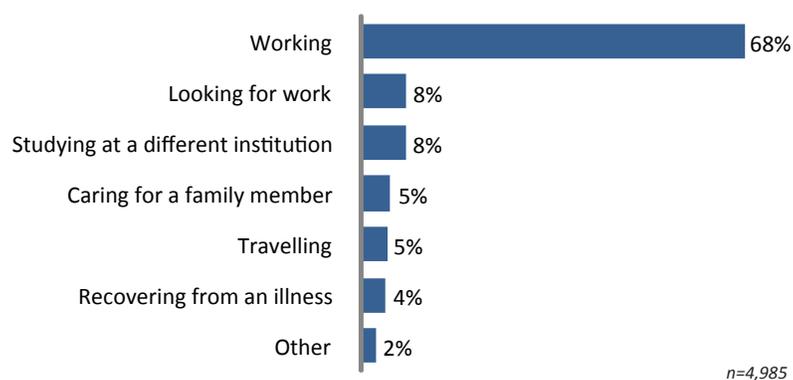
Results varied little by institution type, leaver type, or credits earned.

The majority (59 percent) of those whose main activity was "working" stated that they had had this employment while enrolled. Over half (54 percent) said this employment was some-what or very related to their career path (see *Figure 45*). It would appear that juggling work and studies had contributed to the decision to leave their studies.

Those who left happy were twice as likely to say their job was "very related" to their career path (49 percent) than were unhappy leavers (24 percent). Conversely, 51 percent of un-happy leavers said their job was "not at all related" to their career path, compared with 25 percent of happy leavers.

Figure 45: Relatedness of Employment to Career Path by Leaver Perspective


n=3,337
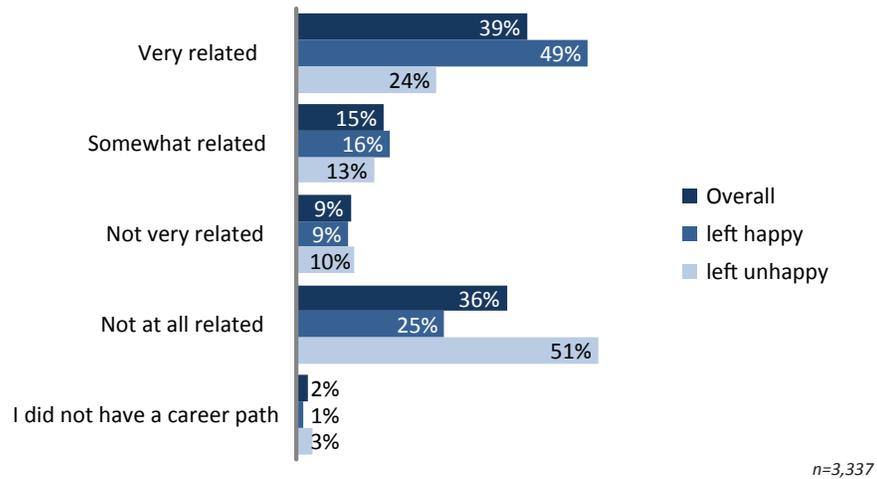
B. Labour Force Outcomes

Leavers were asked a series of questions to determine their labour force status at the time of the survey. Overall, 89 percent of respondents were in the labour force at the time of the survey. Most leavers (82 percent) were working at a paid job or business. The overall unemployment rate was 8 percent, but those who left their program unhappy were more likely to be unemployed (9 percent) than those who left happy (7 percent).

Those unemployed at the time of the survey (n=312) gave various reasons, the most common being "can't find a job/no jobs available" (44 percent).

Those 534 leavers not in the labour force at the time of the survey (neither working nor seeking work) identified their main reason for not seeking work as "personal circumstances," followed by "studying" (see *Figure 46*).

*Figure 46: Reason for Not Seeking Work*
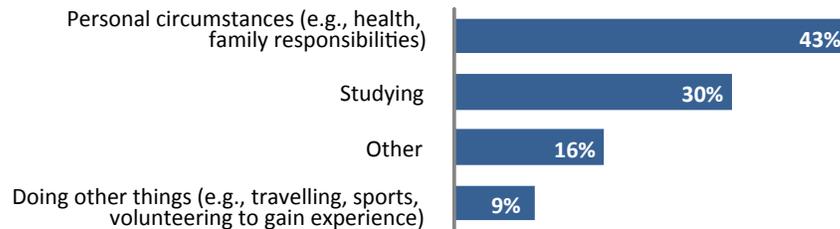
Note: Percentages based on those not in the labour force; n=534

X. Aboriginal Leavers

Respondents were asked, "Do you identify yourself as an Aboriginal person, that is, First Nations, Métis, or Inuit?" Seven percent (n=355) self-identified as Aboriginal. Although results for this group were very similar to those of non-Aboriginal former students in most respects, there were some notable differences.
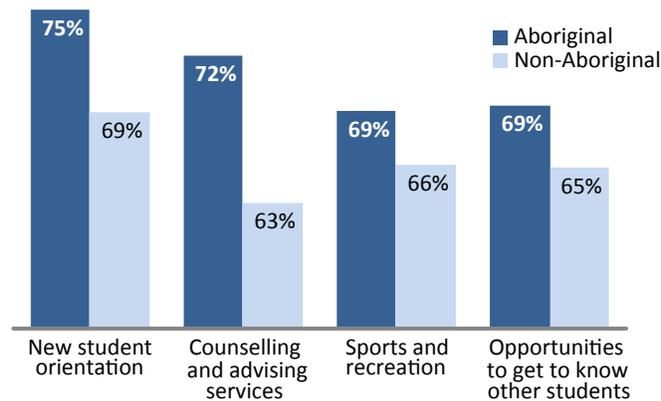
Aboriginal respondents were more likely (66 percent) than non-Aboriginal respondents (59 percent) to be female, and with a median age of 31 at the time they were surveyed, they were older on average than non-Aboriginal respondents (27). They were also more spread out across the province than were non-Aboriginal respondents (see *Figure 47*). About a third of Aboriginal former students (32 percent) had relocated from their home communities to pursue their studies, while less than one-quarter (24 percent) of non-Aboriginal respondents had relocated. Half of Aboriginal leavers were from colleges or institutes, one-quarter were from research universities and one-quarter from teaching universities.

Figure 47: Current Region by Aboriginal Status

n=4,763
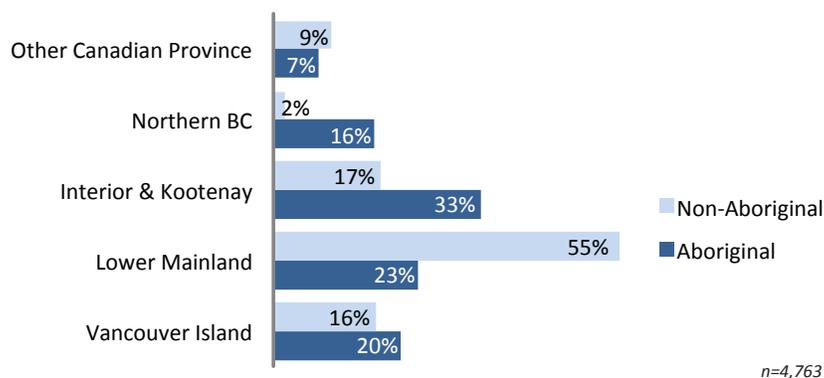
Aboriginal respondents were slightly more likely to have "left happy" (61 percent) compared with non-Aboriginal respondents (58 percent), and 86 percent said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the education they received, compared with 84 percent for non-Aboriginal respondents. Aspects of student life were also rated highly by Aboriginal leavers (see Figure 48) compared with non-Aboriginal leavers.

Figure 48: Aspects of Student Life Rated Good or Very Good by Aboriginal Status


There were no differences in the ratings of aspects of course work between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents and reasons for enrolling varied little. However, Aboriginal leavers were more likely to have felt a sense of belonging at the institution (70 percent) compared with non-Aboriginal leavers (58 percent). They were also more enthusiastic about their studies at time of departure (69 percent) than were non-Aboriginal leavers (64 percent).

Aboriginal leavers were less likely to have received government student loans (18 percent compared with 23 percent) and were more likely to say that finances had contributed to their decision to leave when they did (42 percent compared with 31 percent). Both groups had a median student loan amount of $11,000.

"Employment" was cited most often by both Aboriginal respondents (45 percent) and non-Aboriginal respondents (65 percent) as a main source of funding for their studies. The second most commonly cited funding source for the Aboriginal leavers was "Band Funding" (37 percent).

Figure 49: Main Sources of Funding by Aboriginal Status
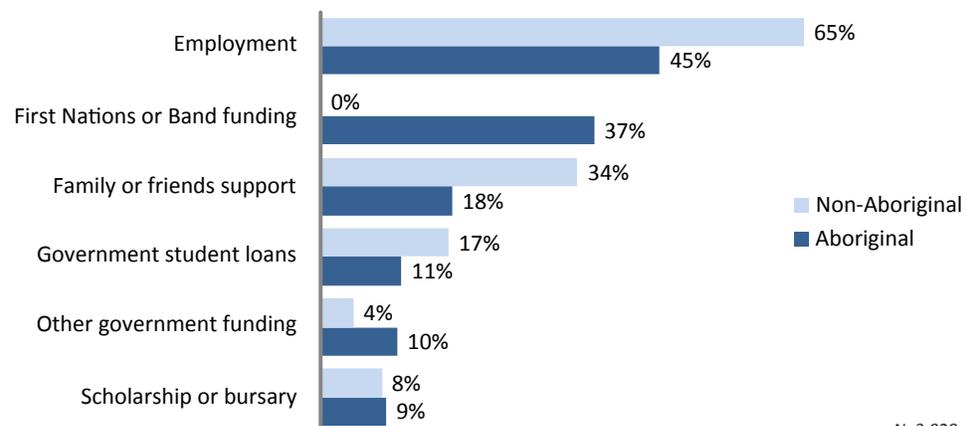
Despite high levels of satisfaction with their educational experience, 39 percent of Aboriginal leavers "left unhappy," neither staying as long as they had planned nor achieving their original goals.

Unhappy leavers' reasons for leaving were similar regardless of Aboriginal status, except that non-Aboriginal leavers were about twice as likely to have said "Changed mind about program/job goals or plans changed" (23 percent) than were Aboriginal leavers (12 percent). When asked about factors that might have influenced them to continue their studies, Aboriginal leavers were more likely than non-Aboriginal leavers to say they could have been influenced to stay (see *Table 4*). This was true for all factors except "not having to work at a job while studying."

Table 4: Factors that May Have Influenced Length of Stay, by Aboriginal Status

	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Greater choice of courses	46%	41%
Better financial support	48%	45%
Not having to work at a job while studying	46%	48%
Better quality instruction	44%	41%
More relevant coursework	44%	44%
More assistance from faculty and staff	43%	39%
More interactions or friendships with other students	33%	29%
Better transportation to/from campus	32%	25%
More remedial courses available	31%	20%
Better access to housing	30%	20%
Better equipment	27%	20%
Less difficult courses	25%	18%

The two main areas that could be addressed to increase retention of Aboriginal students – and of all unhappy leavers – are financial challenges (having to work while studying, not enough financial support) and more academic support (assistance from faculty and staff, better quality instruction, more relevant course work). Although there is always room for improvement, Aboriginal leavers appear to have been more engaged than non-Aboriginal leavers: they are more likely to have felt a sense of belonging, and more likely to have "left happy" (i.e., either stayed as long as originally planned or achieved their goals).

Conclusion

The key finding of this survey is that the 15,000 students who annually leave the B.C. public post-secondary system without a credential represent a diverse group with differing goals and perspectives on their post-secondary experience. Only around half of respondents stated that "complete a credential" was one of their main goals when starting their studies. Eighty-four percent of respondents were somewhat or very satisfied with the education they received, and a majority of leavers have either gone on to more post-secondary education or plan to in the near future.

The study identifies some areas in which improvement might increase student retention. Forty-one percent of respondents left earlier than they had planned without achieving their main goals, and a substantial subset of this group indicated factors that may have influenced them to stay longer. These "unhappy leavers" differ from the majority of leavers in several important ways. They are more likely to be younger, and to have been less enthusiastic when beginning their studies. They are less likely to have been clear on their reasons for enrolling and which courses to take: two-thirds of those who were clear on which courses to take left happy, while only 40 percent of those who were unclear left happy. Leavers who felt a sense of belonging while at the institution were more likely to leave happy. Those who chose their institution for academic reasons, such as the reputation of the program or institution, were more likely to have left happy than those who made their choice based on other factors, such as the location of the institution or the fact that they had friends attending. Students with concrete goals like learning or improving job skills were more likely to leave happy. Unhappy leavers were more likely to have had longer term goals such as obtaining a credential or deciding on or changing careers. On the other hand, level of course difficulty and level of enthusiasm while in high school was not related to whether or not students left happy.

What can be done to help retain these generally younger, unsure leavers? Among the factors students said might have influenced them to stay longer, the most common were "not having to work" (48 percent) and "better financial support" (45 percent). Further research focusing on the young unenthusiastic post-secondary student may point to specific strategies to increase their retention.

Personal reasons such as health or family issues were the most commonly cited reasons for leaving. However, 54 percent of unhappy leavers left because they were disappointed (in themselves, their program or their institution) or for financial reasons. Although even these students rated services and courses highly, they were more likely to give poor ratings to counselling and advising, and availability and helpfulness of instructors.

Results from this survey indicate that efforts to make students feel more engaged and supported, both academically and financially, may increase retention rates. However, most students who leave do so for reasons outside of the institutions' direct control, and the majority are satisfied with the education they received.

Appendix A: Cohort and Respondents by Institution

Short Stay/Early Leaver Survey - Participating British Columbia Public Post-secondary Institutions by Number of Respondents

Institution	n Cohort	n Respondents	Response Rate
British Columbia Institute of Technology	1,343	512	38%
University of Victoria	1,192	459	39%
Simon Fraser University	1,180	425	36%
Kwantlen Polytechnic University	1,432	375	26%
Vancouver Community College	815	356	44%
University of the Fraser Valley	949	312	33%
The University of British Columbia	823	263	32%
Langara College	998	248	25%
Vancouver Island University	720	231	32%
Thompson Rivers University	646	201	31%
Douglas College	795	194	24%
Okanagan College	598	175	29%
Capilano University	492	173	35%
College of New Caledonia	410	170	41%
Camosun College	558	163	29%
University of Northern British Columbia	372	124	33%
North Island College	270	99	37%
Northern Lights College	232	99	43%
University of British Columbia Okanagan	289	99	34%
College of the Rockies	223	93	42%
Thompson Rivers University - Open Learning	170	76	45%
Northwest Community College	189	64	34%
Selkirk College	160	59	37%
Royal Roads University	54	24	44%
Emily Carr University of Art + Design	41	23	56%
Nicola Valley Institute of Technology	57	19	33%
System Total	15,008	5,036	34%

Appendix B: CIP Program Clusters

British Columbia CIP Program Areas

Arts and Sciences

Classification of Instructional Programs code (CIP)	Title
5	Area, ethnic, cultural, and gender studies
9	Communications, journalism and related programs
10	Communications technologies/technician and support services
16	Foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics
23	English Language and literature/letters
24	Liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities
26	Biological and biomedical sciences
27	Mathematics and statistics
30	Multi/inter disciplinary studies
38	Philosophy and religious studies
39	Theology and religious vocations
40	Physical sciences
42	Psychology
45	Social sciences
54	History
55	Langue et literatures française/letters

Trades

CIP	Title
12	Personal and culinary services
46	Construction trades
47	Mechanic and repair technologies/technicians
48	Precision production
49	Transportation and materials moving

Business and Management

CIP	Title
52	Business, management, marketing and related support services

Health

CIP	Title
51	Health professions and related clinical sciences
60	Residency programs

Engineering and Applied Sciences

CIP	Title
1	Agriculture, agriculture operations and related sciences
3	Natural resources and conservation
4	Architecture and related services
11	Computer and information sciences and support services
14	Engineering
15	Engineering technologies/technicians
41	Science technologies/technicians

Education

CIP	Title
13	Education
25	Library services

Human and Social Services

CIP	Title
19	Family and consumer sciences/human sciences
22	Legal Professions and studies
31	Parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies
43	Security and protective services
44	Public administration and social service professionals

Visual and Performing Arts

CIP	Title
50	Visual and performing arts

Developmental

CIP	Title
32	Basic Skills
53	High school/secondary diploma and certificate programs

Personal Improvement and Leisure

CIP	Title
21	Technology education/industrial arts programs
33	Citizenship activities
34	Health-related knowledge and skills
35	Interpersonal and social skills
36	Leisure and recreational activities
37	Personal awareness and self-improvement
89	Continuing Education