

# Research Briefs

## Which Students Drop?

South Texas College is dedicated to student success and completion. Therefore students who fail to continue their studies, or “drops,” are of special interest to the institutional researcher. This study compares two groups: *dropped students* who ended their studies on the Fall 2015 semester’s census date due to non-payment, and *retained students* who remained on their pathways.

At South Texas College, marginal students – both in terms of academic and financial aid status – are more likely to drop. Our dropped students were more likely: to have lower GPA’s; to take course loads of 8 hours or fewer; to be assessed as “not college ready” under the Texas Success Initiative; and to have been on academic probation or suspension at some point in their academic careers. Dropped students were more likely to be new freshmen or to have a gap in their studies. Few of our drops applied for financial aid and nearly none received Pell Grant offers. The dropped student was more likely to be enrolled in a Technical track.

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### **NARRATIVE PROFILES**

The typical dropped student was studying for the Automotive Technology Certificate, a technical major. He did not apply for financial aid this year, and was not offered any Pell Grant support. He was a part-time student, taking anywhere from 4 to 11 credit hours. This was either his first semester as a freshman, or he was returning to school this semester after a gap in his studies. He was assessed as “not college ready” by the Texas Success Initiative. His overall grade point average may have been a C-, or he may have been failing. He may have been on academic probation.

The typical retained student was studying for the Associate’s Degree in Nursing, an academic major. She applied for financial aid and was given a Pell Grant award. She may be a full-time student, taking anywhere from 6 to 14 credit hours. She attended the prior semester and was continuing her studies as usual. She was assessed as “college ready” before coming to South Texas College. Her overall grade point average was two letter-grades higher than the drops group, and her grades placed her in good academic standing.

### **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

In 2011, Research & Analytical Services conducted a brief qualitative study of a similar group of students who did not register for that year’s fall semester. The study identified three main catalysts for drops: enrollment at other institutions, financial aid difficulties, and conflicts with employment. Ancillary reasons included courses registration issues, such as problems with prerequisites, and low testing scores. This study examines these variables and others from a quantitative perspective, with the exception of employment conflicts. (The college does not systemically collect data on the current employment status of retained students.)

### **DROPS: WHAT MATTERS**

**Financial Aid Difficulties.** Dropped students were less likely to apply for financial aid (60% did) than retained students (72%). Consequently, nearly none of them (4%) were offered a Pell Grant award (63% retained students).

**New Freshmen & Gaps in Studies.** Dropped students were more likely to be first-semester freshmen or to have an enrollment gap in their studies (50%), enrollment types we call *Entering Freshmen* and *Returning*, compared to retained students (27%). This suggests less experience in a higher-education environment. Retained students were more likely to be third-semester sophomores (59%), an enrollment type we call *Continuing*, compared to drops (34%). The balance included transfer students and other enrollment types.

**College Readiness.** The Texas Success Initiative requires all prospective Texas college students to pass a state exam in reading, writing and mathematics. Students who pass their exams are classified as “college ready”; those who do not are classified as “not college ready.” Students may be exempt from this classification based on standardized test scores, military service, or other criteria. Nearly half of dropped students (43%) were classified “not college ready,” compared to 34% of retained students. Only 25% of dropped students were “college ready.”

**GPA.** The average GPA for dropped students was 2.2 (C-), two steps lower than retained students (2.7, or C+). A quarter (27%) of dropped students were failing (GPA below 2.0), versus 11% of retained students.

**Credit Hours.** Dropped students took lighter course loads than retained students. Dropped students took an average of 8.0 credit hours, compared to 9.9 hours for retained students. Thirty percent (30%) of dropped students took fewer than 6 credit hours, compared to

only 13% of retained students. Nearly half (44%) of retained students took full-time course loads (12 hours or more).

**Academic Probation/Suspension.** A quarter of dropped students (24%) were on some form of academic probation or suspension, compared to only 10% of retained students.

**Technical vs. Academic Margins.** Dropped students were slightly more likely to be technical majors (44%) than retained students (39%). Because drops were more likely to be technology certificate students, they were also slightly more likely to be enrolled at the Technology Campus in South McAllen than at other campuses.

**Gender.** Most South Texas College students are female, but dropped students were slightly more likely to be male (47%) than retained students (43% male).

**WHAT DOESN'T MATTER**

**Enrollment at Other Institutions.** In contrast to the previous qualitative study, this quantitative study did not find a substantial transfer rate to other higher education institutions. Only 7% of drops (n=51) enrolled elsewhere. Most of these (n=35) enrolled at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley. The balance (n=16) left for other South Texas institutions (e.g. Texas State University, St. Mary's University) or online programs (e.g. Southern New Hampshire University). Five students (n=5) moved outside South Texas.

**Demographics.** There was no substantive difference between dropped and retained students in terms of certain basic demographics. This includes age (average of 24 in both groups, typical of college's non-traditional student body), ethnicity (drops 92% Hispanic, retained 91%), and first generation in college (both groups 68%). We also examined high schools and school districts, but found no meaningful differences. Students from PSJA ISD were slightly more represented in the drops group, only because PSJA ISD is the single largest school district in the college's coverage area.

**Neighborhood Household Income.** Household data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey was

matched to students' home ZIP codes, to judge whether the two groups may differ in income profiles. The difference was non-substantive: dropped students on average lived in ZIP codes where the median household income was \$32,260, compared to \$32,920 for retained students. These figures are only slightly lower than the median household income for Hidalgo County as a whole (\$34,146 in 2013).

**Registration Date.** Were dropped students more likely to register for classes at the last minute? Dropped students registered on average 59 days before classes began (or June 29, 2015). This was substantively the same as retained students (56 days, or June 26). The standard deviation for both groups was a wide 48 days, so there were early and late registrants in both groups.

**Hold.** A *hold* may be placed on a student's file for a variety of reasons, ranging from non-payment of library fines to issues with academic advisement. By definition, dropped students do not have current holds, because they're no longer students; therefore the number of dropped students with holds was zero. One-fifth of retained students (21%) had some form of hold, not unusual for an institution like STC. There was a third group of 136 students who dropped but later re-enrolled at the college, excluded elsewhere from this analysis. Half (53%) of these 're-enrollers' had holds.

**METHODOLOGY**

This quantitative analysis compares South Texas College students during the Fall 2015 semester who maintained their enrollment ("retained students," n=19,367) to students who were dropped due to non-payment on September 9, 2015, the census date for that semester ("dropped students," n=728). The narrative profiles are drawn from the modal (most frequent) and differentiating characteristics of the two groups. Dual-enrollment and other non-traditional students were excluded from the analysis. All the differences between groups discussed here are statistically significant (p < 0.05 throughout).

Table 1. Characteristics of Dropped and Retained Students at South Texas College, Fall 2015

Characteristic	Dropped	Retained	Characteristic	Dropped	Retained
<b>FINANCIAL AID</b>			<b>MAJOR TYPE</b>		
Applied for Financial Aid	60%	72%	Academic Major	56%	61%
Offered Pell Grant	4%	63%	Technical Major	44%	39%
<b>NEW FRESHMEN &amp; GAPS IN STUDIES</b>			<b>OTHER INSTITUTIONS</b>		
Continuing Students	34%	59%	Enrolled at Other Institutions	7%	0%
Entering Freshmen & Returning Students	50%	27%	<b>DEMOGRAPHICS &amp; MISCELLANY</b>		
<b>COLLEGE READINESS</b>			Age (mean)	23.7	24.1
College Ready	25%	40%	Male	47%	43%
Not College Ready	43%	34%	Female	53%	57%
<b>GPA &amp; COURSE LOAD</b>			Hispanic Ethnicity	92%	91%
GPA (mean)	2.2	2.7	First Generation College	68%	68%
Credit Hours (mean)	8.0	9.9	Neighborhood Median Income	\$ 32,258	\$ 32,915
Full-Time 12+ Hours	28%	44%	Registration for Classes (mean date)	June 29	June 26
Part-Time 6-11 Hours	41%	44%	Hold	0%	21%
Part-Time Under 6 Hours	30%	13%	Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding or excluded categories.		
Academic Probation/Suspension	24%	10%			