First Year Student Exit Interviews – Final Report

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First Year Student Exit Interviews

Going off to college can be a terrifying and exciting adventure. To leave home (maybe for the first time), saying goodbye to your family and friends and heading to Winona State to pursue a degree takes a lot of personal commitment. In fall 2005, for approximately 25% of our first year students (422 students), their decision to attend WSU didn't last for a second year (WSU Institutional Research). As an intervention and a service to students, exit interviews were conducted with first year students to provide information and problem solving to departing students. Also, these meetings allowed for information gathering as to why these students are leaving. The following report provides an overview of the exit interview initiative that was conducted over the past year as well as recommendations for the future.

Procedure

Once the proposal received approval, Institutional Research and Assessment at WSU was contacted to better understand past attempts at exit interviews. Previous attempts at gathering information from departing students led to disappointing results (21 exit surveys completed out of over 400 departing students). The point of contact to reach these departing students focused on the point when students turned in their laptops. Departing first year students were asked to complete an electronic exit survey in the Information Technology (IT) department after they turned in their laptop. This strategy relied on the student workers at the IT desk reminding departing students to complete the survey as well as the students following through.

In hopes of achieving higher results with this exit interview initiative, a broader net was cast. Referrals for exit interviews were encouraged from various offices campus wide. Specifically, the Registrars Office, Housing and Residence Life, Cultural Diversity, Advising and Retention, Financial Aid and Admissions were enlisted as key areas that could refer students

for an exit interview before they left campus. In addition, a campus wide 'all faculty/staff' email

was sent out to announce the exit interview initiative and the referral procedure if they came in

contact with a student that was thinking of leaving WSU. It should be noted that Housing and

Residence Life, especially the resident advisors, proved to be a pivotal referral source. Where

Information Technology is a last place students go before leaving campus, the 'RAs' are usually

the first on campus to know if students are planning to leave. Although, students that came in for

exit interviews came from all areas of campus, a majority were referred from Housing and

Residence Life. This department was particularly helpful in using their list serves to send out

correspondence with new entering freshmen in the residence halls. For example, an email was

sent to all students in the residence halls reminding them that if they plan on not returning to

WSU then they need to complete an interview.

Students were referred to Howell 133 for an exit interview. This interview consisted of a

discussion of primary reasons for not wanting to continue their education at WSU. Also, an

overview of steps the student would need to take to successfully transition from WSU (fig. 2)

and a completion of the Student Exit Survey (fig 1). At times, the Student Exit Survey was

completed by the interviewer if the information was generated through he course of the

interview. If the interviewer was unavailable, students were asked to complete the Student Exit

Survey and take a Withdrawal Checklist.

Institutional Research with the help of IT created a computer program to track New

Entering Freshmen (NEF) and find which of students had dropped their classes, left housing and

turned in their laptop. This was particularly helpful in tracking down those students that left the

university without coming in for an interview. Also, throughout the semester, Institutional

Research was utilized to find data on which students of the NEF cohort had not registered for the

following semester. This data was also helpful in finding those students that are not returning and did not complete an exit interview.

Another aspect of this initiative involved finding a 'best practices' approach to exit interviews by researching how other institutions conduct exit interviews and how the resulting data is used. For this initiative, Luther College in Decorah, IA, St. Mary's University of Minnesota in Winona, MN, and University of Wisconsin – La Crosse were chosen and researched.

The qualitative and quantitative results from exit interviews and the exit surveys were gathered and interpreted. These results were compared with the results from researching best practices to conclude with recommendations for the future.
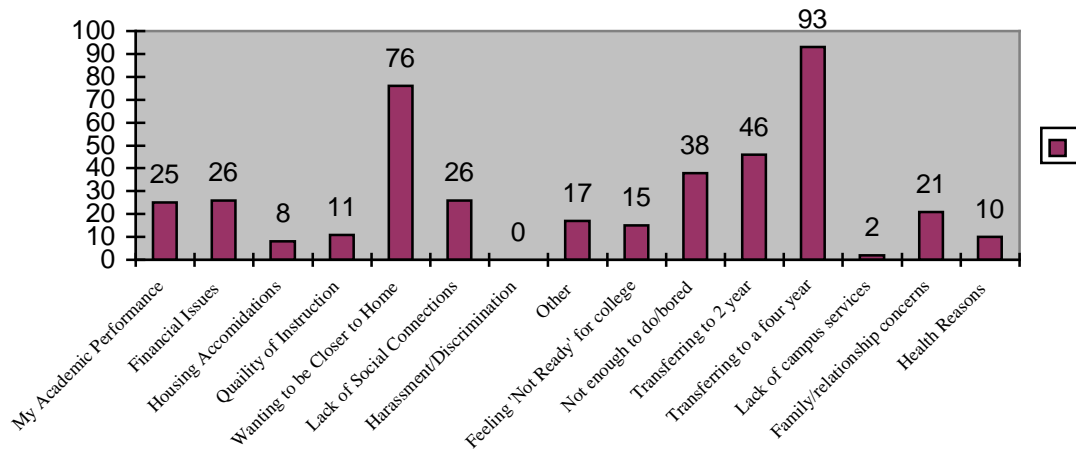
<div align="center">Survey Results</div>

Although Winona State University has a strong reputation for data collection and assessment, little is known as to why students withdraw from the university. Most recent attempts to collect data from this population were in the form of a volunteer survey which produced a low response rate (21 surveys completed in fall 2005). Utilizing numerous referral sources generated a stronger response rate for this initiative. For the 2006/2007 academic year, a total of 211 exit interviews and surveys were completed. A total of 78 interviews/surveys were completed in the fall and 133 interviews/surveys were completed in the spring. With a starting cohort of 1,730 students, approximately 12% of NEF were interviewed. Current data of 2006 NEF illustrates that approximately 426 of NEF that were enrolled for the fall 2006 semester are currently not enrolled for fall 2007. If this figure holds true, it would mean that approximately 50% of departing first year students came in for an interview.

It was decided that instead of continuing with the current "Why Leave WSU Survey?", a new survey was created. The Student Exit Survey is a combination of open ended questions, Likert scale responses and check box responses (Fig. 1). Survey information was completed for every student that came in for an exit interview. The initial question of the survey was an opened ended question asking the student for the 'primary reason for leaving'. This question elicited numerous and varied responses. A complete listing of responses is listed on the portal under the 'Faculty Staff" section.

The graph below illustrates various reasons for leaving the university (graph 1). Students were asked to indicate their reasons for leaving and to check all that apply. As indicated in graph 1, the highest response went to 'transferring to a four year institution' and 'wanting to be closer to home'. A higher indication of wanting to transfer also corresponds to data from the Minnesota Office of Higher Education. This data indicates that Winona State University has the highest transfer out rate of all the MNSCU institutions at 36% (seen in six year study of 1998 cohort).

(graph 1)

The survey results that follow illustrate feedback that indicates satisfactory, as expected results. As indicated, respondents found that WSU did a satisfactory job in transitioning students to life as a college student. Students found it somewhat easy to meet friends and overall difficultness of course was as expected. What may be the most striking response is that 94% of respondents believed that WSU could not have done anything to have changed their decision.

How well did WSU do to help you transition to life as a college student?

Great Job

16 (8%)

Good Job

39 (19%)

Satisfactory

138 (69%)

Poor

8 (4%)

Very Poor

0 (0%)

Total: 201

How easy was it for you to make friends at WSU?
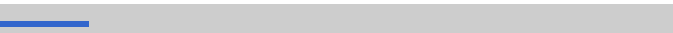
Very Easy

16 (8%)

Easy

31 (15%)

Somewhat Easy

122 (60%)

Not Easy

31 (15%)

Difficult

2 (1%)

Total: 202

Was the level of difficulty in your classes, what you expected?

More Difficult

13 (7%)

Somewhat difficult

24 (12%)

As expected

149 (75%)

Less difficult

8 (4%)

Easy

4 (2%)

Total: 198

Was Winona State University what you expected?

Yes

160 (78%)

No, If no-Please explain

44 (22%)

Total: 204

Is there anything WSU could have done differently that would have changed your decision to leave?
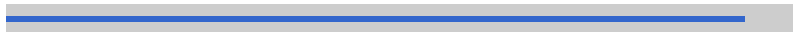
Yes If yes, please explain

12 (6%)

No

187 (94%)

Total: 199

Initiative Findings

Overall the survey results were very similar to data collected from Institutional Research and Assessment.   The top reasons for leaving as indicated on the survey include a desire to transfer to another institution and a desire to be closer to home. Even though survey results provided no new findings, there were many insightful discoveries provided during the course of this initiative. The following is an overview of select key initiative findings:

- ➢ **There is a need for exit interviews at WSU** - By far the most surprising aspect of this initiative was how quickly referrals came in for interviews from across campus. Having an identified point person to provide answers to questions about transferring and general guidance seemed to fill a void (need) on campus that, once filled, provided a natural outlet for staff and students. Academic departments, faculty and staff from various areas seemed to quickly utilize an exit interview resource person.

- ➢ **Interviews provided a chance for additional 'background information' that was not included in the survey** – The exit interviews provided qualitative data that is not readily accessed through a survey. These interviews provided a sense of closure to students that have decided to leave (rather than a 'turn in your laptop and go' approach). Exit interviews allowed an interviewee to tell their story. For example, interviews allowed students a chance to share a lot of supplemental information to what they marked on the Student Exit Survey.

➢ **Exit interviews allowed the interviewer to listen for consistent themes when meeting with students –** Several qualitative themes became evident through the interview initiative. For example, after hearing the students' story, 'not ready for college' sounded like students feeling overwhelmed by their parents making most choices/decision for them and then suddenly being on their own to fend for themselves. With minimal coping strategies not fully developed, these students found it necessary to abandon their college experience and return home. Another example is 'wanting to be closer to home', these students would often describe good intentions about wanting to be a student at WSU but then found themselves going home more and more on the weekends until transferring to a college closer to home 'made more sense'. Overall, this qualitative data provides useful information that is not found through survey results.

Best Practices

As an attempt to find a 'best practices model', three institutions were researched to identify how exit interviews were conducted and how the data was used. It was attempted to identify three regional institutions of similar size. It could be said that a 'tri-state' approach was taken to the selection of institutions. The colleges that were reviewed were University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, Luther College and St Mary's University of Minnesota. Overall, it is recommended that exit interviews be centralized in a student life or dean of students' office. This centralized space will insure that any repeat concerns can be handled directly. Also, these offices tend to act as a hub for other departments and would be a logical place for students to initiate an exit process.

University of Wisconsin – La Crosse

At the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse, all departing students are to meet with the Assistant Dean of Students and complete an exit survey. In addition, departing students are required to complete a 'Withdrawal Form". This form requires that students get signatures from various offices on campus as a way of signing them out. This also acts as a checklist to help students ensure that they have completed all the necessary steps to transition smoothly. A copy of this form is given to the student and a copy is given to the Records and Registration office. One of the signatures that is required is from the Student Life Office when the exit interview takes place. Students complete the exit survey at the end of the interview. As reported from UW-L, recent survey results indicate that the top reasons for withdrawing during the fall 2005/spring 2006 year include: Transferring, Family Related, Work Related, Medical Mental, Medical Physical.

Luther College

At Luther College, departing students meet with Bob Feldy, Associate Dean of Students. Departing students initiate a 'checkout procedure' staring with an interview. During the interview, students are asked about their intentions of returning to Luther, asked why they are leaving and asked to complete an exit survey. They exit survey asks students to rank their reasons for leaving and to evaluate various aspects/departments of the college. Students are also given a checklist of tasks they will need to complete to withdrawal.

St. Mary's University of Minnesota

Students departing St. Mary's meet with an academic advisor. Through the use of an auto email alert and other means, St Mary's typically meets with 90% of departing students. In fact, most recently, all but six students were contacted to complete an interview/survey. Students

are given an extensive exit survey and a checklist of signatures directing students to various

offices where they may need to take care of any business before they leave. As reported by St.

Marys, the main reasons students indicate for wanting to leave include: wanting to be closer to

home, wanting opportunities of a larger community and personal/family concerns.

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

The following is an overview of recommendations based on exit interview findings and

practices of other institutions.

- **Continue Exit Interviews** – Exit interviews provide valuable information to the

  university and a valuable service to student and should continue in some form. Exit

  interviews should take place from a central location on campus.

- **Modify Exit Survey** – the Student Exit Survey should be modified to include options for

  students to indicate mental illness, City of Winona and military deployment as reasons

  for leaving. A separate section to receive on feedback on the students experience in the

  City of Winona may also be warranted.

- **Develop Student Life at WSU** – A consistent story from departing students was one of

  students intending on making WSU their one choice for a college experience in the

  beginning of the semester and then finding themselves going home more and more on the

  weekends. Then, discovering that their friends on campus were also going home on the

  weekend. This left little social support or student culture for departing student to buy

  into. This creates a situation of students needing to 'look elsewhere' for institution to

  provide this experience. Also, for many students, going home on the weekend means that

  WSU is something they 'do during the week' as if it were a job. Many of these students

  describe transferring closer to home as almost a logical choice (as a way to save on gas

money). Regardless of if a student intends to stay at WSU or not, once they are here it is

an opportunity to keep them here. It is believed that building a stronger culture here

would lessen the effects of student attrition.

Objective Outcomes

Objective #1 - Provide exit interviews for first year students as an intervention. During the
course of this initiative 78 exit interviews were completed during fall 2006 semester and
133 interviews were completed during the spring semester for a total of 211 interviews

**Objective #2 - Assess and determine 'best practices' for Winona State University to
implement an exit interview system for students withdrawing from WSU**. For this
initiative, Luther College, St Mary's University of Minnesota and University of
Wisconsin- La Crosse were contacted to determine what role exit interviews play on their
campus and how data is used. From this, it is recommended that exit interviews are
useful and necessary and should be located in a central place on campus (preferably a
student life or dean of student's office).

**Objective #3 - Compile and interpret data collected from first year students withdrawing
from WSU to determine possible trends/causation of student departure.** As
mentioned earlier, it is believed that student life plays a large role in creating a culture for
first year students to buy into. If a culture is not developed than students will try to rely
on their 'old' culture back home. Providing an alternative culture through the
development of student life will alleviate student attrition through a more proper social
integration of the student in to the WSU environment. Creating and nurturing a positive
social climate will provide a network for students to continue their college student
development process here at WSU rather than another institution.

Discussion

Information that is gained through an interview process is invaluable to several departments

including Admissions, Residence Life, Advising, Financial Aid, and the academic departments.

Exit interviews also provide a sense of quality control and accountability to departing students.

Overall, I found exit interviews to be a win-win. For us, we gained valuable insights and

information. For the student, it was a chance to share their story, get guidance on what is next

and find closure. I sincerely hope that exit interviews continue on this campus in some form.

(Fig. 1)

Student Exit Survey
Winona State University
_____

Grade Level (circle):   First-year   Sophomore   Junior   Senior

Primary reason for leaving WSU (please explain):
_____

Any other factors contributing to decision to leave (circle all that apply):

☐ My academic performance   ☐ Feeling "Not Ready" for college
☐ Financial issues   ☐ Not enough to do/bored
☐ Housing accommodations   ☐ Transferring to a two-year college
☐ Quality of instruction   ☐ Transferring to a four-year university
☐ Wanting to be closer to home   ☐ Lack of campus services
☐ Lack of social connections   ☐ Family/relationship concerns
☐ Harassment/Discrimination   ☐ Health reasons
☐ Other_____

Rate the following:

How well did Winona State do to help you transition to life as college student? **(circle)**
        Great job-------------Good Job------------------Satisfactory------------Poor-----------Very Poor

How easy was it for you to make friends at WSU? **(circle)**
        Very easy-------------Easy----------------Somewhat easy---------------Not easy------------Difficult

Was the level of difficulty in your classes what you expected? **(circle)**
        More difficult------Somewhat difficult----------As expected-------Less difficult---------Easy

Answer the following:

Was Winona State University what you expected?
        ☐ = Yes   ☐ = No   If no, please explain:_____

Is there anything WSU could have done differently that would have changed your decision to leave?
        ☐ = Yes   ☐ = No   If yes, please explain:_____

Any additional comments:

(Fig. 1)

(Fig. 2)

Checklist for Withdrawing from Winona State University

Are you leaving RIGHT NOW?

☐ **Housing** – complete intent to vacate form (Kryzsko 130), get checked out by RA

☐ **Drop classes** (until last day to drop -Thurs 4/5) –online

☐ **Financial Aid** – (Somsen 108) - lending exit interview?

☐ **Tech Support** (Somsen 207) – turn in laptop

☐ **Have a plan for what is next** (Home, transfer, other)

☐ **Accounts Receivable** (Somsen 104) – Pay any remaining charges

☐ Contact your campus employer (if applicable)

Are you TRANSFERRING/LEAVING AT SEMESTER?

☐ Did you apply to transfer school?

☐ Did you send transcript (likely send a 2nd after final grades are posted)

☐ Have they talked to advisor there about what classes to take? (at new school)

☐ **Housing** (Kryszko 130)–complete intent to vacate, get checked out by RA (end of semester)

☐ **Financial Aid** – (Somsen 108) lending exit counseling (find out about transferring Fin Aid)

☐ **Tech Support** (Somsen 207) – turn in laptop (end of semester)

☐ **Accounts Receivable** (Somsen 104) – Pay any remaining charges

☐ Contact your campus employer (if applicable)

Are you TRANSFERRING/LEAVING AT THE END OF THE YEAR?

☐ Did you apply to transfer school?

☐ Did you send transcript (likely send a 2nd after final grades are posted)

☐ Have they talked to advisor there about what classes to take? (at new school)

☐ **Housing** (Kryszko 130)– get checked out by RA (end of year)

☐ **Financial Aid** – (Som 108) possible lending exit counseling (indicate new school on FAFSA)

☐ **Tech Support** (Somsen 207) – turn in laptop (end of finals week)

☐ **Accounts Receivable** (Somsen 104) – Pay any remaining charges

☐ Contact your campus employer (if applicable)

(Fig. 2)