

Interview Survey of Non-Returning NDSU Undergraduates

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Why do some undergraduate students leave NDSU before they graduate? How do non-returning undergraduates view NDSU? To answer these questions, the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis (OIRA) designed a telephone interview survey asking non-returning undergraduates why they left NDSU. To increase interviewee comfort with sharing honest feedback, NDSU contracted with Harstad Strategic Research, Inc., a nationally-known research consultation firm, to complete the telephone interviews. A total of 402 interviews were completed; respondents proportionally represent students who leave NDSU in good/bad academic standing and those who enroll elsewhere after leaving NDSU and those who do not.

What follows is a brief top-level summary and two pages of results. An appendix explains the survey methodology, population, and analysis strategies.

Summary

- Most non-returning students have a favorable impression of NDSU and think it is a good university
 - and their impression of NDSU was generally the same regardless of a host of demographics examined or their academic performance while here
- Non-returning students ARE NOT leaving NDSU because
 - they are overwhelmingly dissatisfied with their experience here
 - they have given up on earning a college degree
 - they passively blame NDSU for their academic outcomes
 - they are disappointed with academic support services
- Non-returning students ARE leaving NDSU because of
 - problems related to choosing a major, changing a major, major availability, and major selectivity
 - personal situations
 - academic problems
 - financial and work constraints
 - perceiving NDSU as too large, classes as too large, or feeling “treated like a number”
- Overall, non-returning students want their experiences on campus, in class, and in advising to have continuity, to be personalized, and to be engaging

Evidence contrary to assumptions about why students leave NDSU

Non-returning students were generally satisfied with their experience here

A large majority of non-returning students have a favorable impression of NDSU. Eighty-two percent would definitely or probably recommend NDSU to a friend. Eighty-four percent rate NDSU overall as a place to go to college as excellent or good. Of 36 ratings of aspects of NDSU—including academics, support services, advising, and social experiences—only one item was rated negatively by a majority of participants (to be covered below). Results did not vary based on a host of background, demographic, or academic variables, which suggests students experience NDSU similarly regardless of their background or their level of academic success while here.

Non-returning students have not given up on earning a college degree

Nearly 60% of survey participants enrolled somewhere else at some point after leaving NDSU. Of those who did not, nearly 30% say they will probably or definitely still get a college degree. Of those enrolling elsewhere, 7 have earned a two-year degree and 11 have earned a four-year degree since leaving NDSU (as of 9/2015). Eighty percent disagreed with the statement, “my coursework was too difficult.”

Non-returning students do not passively blame negative outcomes on NDSU

When asked, “What could NDSU have done better for you?”, 41% answered something akin to “nothing” or “It wasn’t NDSU’s fault.” This was by far the most frequent response type to this question. A nearly identical proportion of students leaving in bad and good academic standing said “nothing.”

Non-returning students utilize academic support services and are satisfied when they do

Only 19% said they *never* visited any of the academic support services they were asked about, which included ACE Tutoring, the Center for Writers, the Career Center, TRIO, and other campus tutoring services. ACE Tutoring was the most frequently used service, with 58% of the respondents using ACE Tutoring at least once while at NDSU. Over 90% of those who used any of these services rated their satisfaction with the service as very or somewhat satisfied.

Why ARE NDSU undergraduates leaving?

Trouble settling on a NDSU major

The most common theme related to leaving NDSU was difficulty in choosing a major. Many respondents cited having trouble choosing a major, changing their minds about their major, no longer feeling interested in their chosen major, or wanting to change to a major that is not offered at NDSU. In a related vein, students noted problems in meeting academic requirements for selective majors; these students opted to continue their coursework at an institution where requirements were less stringent and/or time to degree was shorter. Students earning higher GPAs while at NDSU, in particular, indicated that they left NDSU in order to change majors or to find a major they liked better.

Personal reasons for leaving NDSU

A number of students said they had to leave for personal reasons such as health concerns or family situations. Other personal concerns included leaving college to work or to move closer to family and friends. A small number of students said they did not feel they had the maturity level or motivation to do well in college at this time.

Financial concerns

Several noted that tuition was too expensive, that they didn't qualify for loans or aid, or their family was not able to financially support them in college. Some left for a less expensive institution. It is noteworthy that students who had lower NDSU GPAs said financial aid was insufficient more of the time than students with higher GPAs. Not surprisingly, the same was true for Pell Eligible students.

Academic problems

Although about half of the non-returning students in this sample left NDSU in bad academic standing, only 8% said they left NDSU because of academic problems such as bad grades or being administratively suspended.

NDSU's size and location

Some had complaints about Fargo's climate and various concerns about NDSU's or Fargo's culture not being a good fit. A more consistent concern was feeling "treated like a number." Some non-returning students said their experience on campus, in class, and in advising was impersonal. Large class sizes made it difficult to connect with instructors and the material. Of the top six most negatively rated items, two pertained to class size being too large, one to opportunities to interact with professors, and one to feeling treated like a number, not a person.

Feedback on instruction and advising

Directly related to concerns about NDSU feeling too large and impersonal, non-returning students articulately describe good instruction and good advising as engaging, personalized, and supportive. When non-returning students say instruction at NDSU is bad, it is because they found instructors to be unavailable and impersonal with overly large, unengaging classrooms. When they say instructors are better at their new institution, it is because they perceive their instructors as more available, supportive, and responsive to their needs (note that instructor knowledge and mastery of course content is less important to non-returning students). Feedback on advising is much the same. When non-returning students say their advisors are better at their new institution, it is because the advisors are perceived as more available, responsive, and personally invested in students' success. This is especially the case for students with lower academic achievement.

Student feedback on good instruction and advising is important—experiences in the classroom and advising are the most significant factors in determining a student's overall view of NDSU. Students who have good experiences in the classroom and in advising have more favorable views of NDSU overall.

Finally, 55% of non-returning students at least somewhat agree with the statement, "I had a professor with an accent so strong that I had trouble learning." This was especially the case in the College of Engineering where 74% of students at least somewhat agreed with this statement.

Appendix: Methodology

Survey Design:

The survey was designed to include a mix of open-ended questions and likert item ratings batteries covering a wide variety of non-returning students' views and experiences related to NDSU. Phone interviews took place in March-April, 2015 and were conducted by a phone bank service supervised by Harstad Strategic Research, Inc. Interviews were 12-15 minutes in length. OIRA and Harstad Strategic Research, Inc. collaborated on question creation, content, and order. Responses are identifiable at the student level allowing for consideration of institutional variables. Ten open-ended questions asked students about reasons for enrolling in and leaving NDSU, good and bad points of instruction, goals for advising, what NDSU could have done better, and positive aspects of their new institution if enrolled somewhere else at the time interviews were taking place. Forty-five likert items asked for ratings of various aspects of NDSU including instruction, advising, social adjustment, campus support, campus and city culture, and utilization of services.

Participants:

Harstad Strategic Research, Inc. was given a list of 3,472 non-returning NDSU undergraduates from academic years 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and Fall 2014. Students were included in the sample if they were admitted as first-year or transfer students and left NDSU prior to degree completion during one of the three aforementioned academic years. Students of all academic levels at time of departure were included. Calling order was prioritized by the most recent cohort first and then by focusing on students who 1) left in good academic standing and enrolled elsewhere, 2) left in bad academic standing and enrolled elsewhere, 3) left in good academic standing and DIDN'T enroll elsewhere, and 4) left in bad academic standing and DIDN'T enroll elsewhere.

402 phone interviews were completed; interviews were stopped due to budget constraints and success with capturing a representative sample. Participants were roughly representative of the NDSU undergraduate population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and residency. Academic colleges were proportionally represented. All academic levels were represented, and students' academic standing at time of departure and subsequent enrollment following NDSU were well represented. See below:

	Count	Percent		Left in GOOD Standing	Left in BAD Standing
Freshman	127	31.6	Enrolled	126	44
Sophomore	152	37.8	Elsewhere	31.3%	10.9%
Junior	64	15.9	NOT Enrolled	90	142
Senior	59	14.7	Elsewhere	22.4%	35.3%
Total	402	100			

Analyses:

Harstad Strategic Research, Inc. completed summary, inferential, and qualitative analyses. OIRA replicated Harstad analyses and further examined the role of a host of institutional variables both quantitatively and qualitatively (e.g., 1st Generation status, Pell Eligibility, academic college, etc.). Approximately 2,000 unique responses to open-ended questions were thematically coded and summarized.

Creating one document capturing *every* important nugget from this rich source of information is impractical. This summary represents central findings and actionable information; follow-up presentations may be tailored and more detailed as appropriate to various audiences (e.g., instructional faculty, academic advisors, administrators, etc.).