

# Why Do Students Withdraw from Online Graduate Nursing and Health Studies Education?

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## Abstract

Why do nursing and health studies graduate students who are enrolled in online programs decide to withdraw? The qualitative study reported in this paper investigated students' self-identified reasons for withdrawing from an online graduate program in nursing and health studies. The focus of the study was Athabasca Universities' Centre for Nursing and Health Studies (CNHS) online graduate program. Data were collected from program students who initiated withdrawal between the years 1999-2004. Using Rovai's (2002) Composite Persistence Model as a framework for analysis, themes identified from withdrawing students' notice of withdrawal letters are discussed. The major reasons for leaving can be placed into two categories, personal reasons (often related to life or work commitments) and program reasons (usually related to learning style and fit with career). These findings, and the resulting analysis, have implications for online program design and delivery and student support programs. With a better understanding of student reasons for leaving a program of studies, it will be possible to explore which program elements might be altered to improve the experience of online learning.

## Introduction

This study investigated student withdrawals from the Athabasca University Centre for Nursing and Health Studies (CNHS) online graduate program from 1999-2004. The research project involved the collection of qualitative data that focused on students' self-identified reasons for withdrawing from their program of studies.

While the reasons why students leave educational programs have been commonly explored in traditional undergraduate classroom programs, there is a dearth of literature concerning such matters at the graduate level and in programs delivered online. The outcomes of this study provide a systematic analysis of student reported reasons for attrition in the CNHS graduate program. The paper begins with a review of relevant literature including a description of the framework for analysis which is Rovai's (2002) Composite Persistence Model (CPM). Next, the study methodology is outlined followed by a description of the major findings. Predominant themes fall into two major categories, personal reasons (often related to life or work commitments) and program reasons (usually related to learning style and fit with career). In the final sections of the paper the findings are discussed more fully and conclusions are presented which may inform those who design and lead online graduate programs assisting them to reduce rates of attrition, maximize the use of resources, and provide an optimum learning experience.

## *Definition of Terms*

The terms used in the literature to describe students who leave a program of studies prior to completion vary. For consistency, the term attrition will be used throughout this paper to refer to students who have withdrawn from the CNHS graduate program after being formally accepted into the program and registered in their first course. CNHS graduate student withdrawal data has been categorized in three ways; Centre withdrawal (students unable to fulfill the program requirement to complete two courses per year), academic withdrawal (students who fail two courses in the program) and, student withdrawal (students who leave for reasons not obviously related to Centre or academic requirements). For the purposes of this study we focused on student withdrawal. It is acknowledged that a precise division between these three categories is not always possible as academic performance and completing of courses is often linked to personal factors. However all of the withdrawals analyzed for the purpose of this paper were

initiated by students and did not come as a result of failing courses or from not carrying the required course load.

### **Relevant Literature**

The attrition rate of an educational program has been thought to be an important variable in determining the quality of a program and in attracting students (Gabrielle, 2001; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Although attrition has been investigated from several perspectives beginning with traditional "face-to-face" education, uptake of the findings into practice has been limited. Terms and concepts used to describe attrition are neither defined nor used consistently in the literature. This lack of clarity makes generalization and transferability of findings related to attrition problematic. The definitional slippage and overlapping of "face-to-face," distance and online educational practices within the literature have implications for comparing both the methods and outcomes reported in other literature or settings. Currently, little is published and hence, known about attrition in graduate online learning programs. Thus it is an area that warrants examination to explore whether, and how, attrition rates may be influenced in, or by, such teaching and learning experiences. If such influences can be discovered, they in turn can be examined to determine if they can be altered to keep students in online learning programs. Chyung (2001), for example, reported a reduction in attrition rates from 44% to 22% over three years in the Boise State University online Master of Science: Instructional and Performance Technology program after program changes were made in response to student attrition feedback. While the Chyung study focused on the measurement of attrition rates, an important aspect of reducing attrition rates comes from knowledge about why students decide to leave. Because such information has the potential to positively influence attrition rates, educational administrators need to know the reasons why students withdraw from specific programs in order to know what to do to keep students in programs. According to Gabrielle (2001) technical quality and student interaction in online studies were significant predictors of distance education student satisfaction. Where difficulties with technical access to online learning programs have been identified as a problem for online students, overall ratings by students who completed asynchronous learning network (ALN) based courses were equal or superior to those of traditional courses (Hiltz, 1997). Hiltz (1997) went on to observe however that dropouts or incomplete outcomes were more prevalent among online students (p. 16). While online learning attrition rates in higher education

programs have been reported to vary from 20 to 50%, no national statistics are available to compare online learning program completion or dropout rates (Frankola, 2001). According to The Canadian Association of Graduate Schools (2004), their report on *The Completion of Graduate Studies in Canadian Universities* showed a variation in completion rates from 54 to 81 % for all graduate programs with withdrawals from programs occurring sometimes after several semesters of study.

Parker (1999) examined locus of control as a variable in determining rates of “persistence,” an indicator of student retention that has been used in earlier research. As a behavioral intention shaped by beliefs and attitudes (Bean, 1990) or the relationship between the student’s motivation and ability with the educational institution’s characteristics and student’s level of motivation and ability (Tinto, 1993), persistence is demonstrated by the student who does not drop a course or a program. While these are important beginnings for better understanding online graduate students, reasons for their withdrawal from such programs of study require more explicit and thorough examination for a number of reasons. Whatever the reasons are for student attrition, Metzner and Bean (1987) concluded it is, “costly to the institution and the student alike” (p.15).

Understanding the reasons why students leave their studies may not only give educators the information necessary for developing strategies to prevent attrition but ultimately save these institutional and personal costs.

The CPM developed by Rovai (2002) to explain persistence in distance education online programs, was chosen as the framework for analysis in this study. While Rovai’s model focuses on reasons why students continue in their studies, such persistence factors can also be used to situate the reasons for attrition collected for analysis in this study. For example, if a certain factor influences a student’s decision to persist in a program it is logical the absence of that factor may also be a reason for leaving. With the addition of “new” skills required by online students to the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1982), and The Student Attrition Model (Metzner & Bean, 1987), Rovai’s model incorporates student characteristics and skills as well as external and internal influences on students’ decision to stay in or leave online learning programs.

## Study Goals

Student admission, progress, withdrawals and completion records have been maintained on CNHS graduate students since 1999. While the data relevant to attrition in the graduate program over that period is available, these data have never been systematically extracted and analyzed in order to address matters related to reasons for students leaving this online program of graduate studies. This study involved the review of the reasons given by students for withdrawing from the graduate program. These findings may serve as a basis for critically reviewing what aspects, if any, of the attrition experience can be, or need to be, addressed to ensure the highest quality online graduate program possible both in design and delivery.

The goal of the project was to discover the online graduate students' reasons for voluntarily withdrawing from the CNHS program. The focus was on students who were admitted to the program in the years 1999 through 2004. The analysis of the data collected from students who withdrew from their program of studies provide the preliminary information for a model of attrition of particular relevance to the CNHS graduate program and possibly online education graduate programs in general. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Extract student reported reasons for withdrawing from the CNHS graduate programs from written notices (emails) received from students who withdrew between 1999 and 2004.
2. Analyze the written reasons for withdrawal to determine emerging themes. The data collected is limited to those who withdrew for reasons other than Centre program or academic requirements.
3. Identify program and student variables that might be altered through the development of changes in the graduate program and/or student support systems.

## Method

All students who are accepted into a graduate program in the CNHS have an active or archived personal file. Those students who withdrew from the program had written an email to the Graduate Coordinator indicating their intention to withdraw. These emails included comments

detailing the individual's reasons for withdrawing. The length of the comments varied from one sentence to several paragraphs. All of these emails were kept in the student files. In total there were 113 emails available as data for this study. Of the 113 participants 17 students had been accepted into graduate studies in the CNHS but had not started any course work before they "withdrew." This left 86 students who had formally registered in and started course work in the CNHS graduate program and subsequently decided to withdraw from the program on their own initiative. The length of time in the program prior to withdrawal varied from 2 months to 2 years. Of the 86 students, 84 (98%) were female. Thirty-one (36%) of the students indicated they wanted to return to the program when their circumstances made that possible. Copies were made of the study emails with personal identifiers removed.

A team of four researchers independently preformed content analysis on the written documents to identify predominant key words and concepts (Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2004). In follow-up analysis sessions the researchers met face-to-face and reviewed the documents and the key words and concepts they had established independently. As a group the researchers came to agreement on the themes conveyed by the key words and concepts. The thematic analysis was at the conceptual level in that the themes related to the existence and frequency of concepts in the text (Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2004). The group discussion eventually led to a collapsing and renaming of like themes.

To summarize, through reading and re-reading the data, first individually and then as a group, the researchers came to agreement regarding the major themes within the data set. To overcome the lack of guidelines for content analysis of qualitative data, the researchers enacted Owens (2002) three points of reference when analyzing the data: recurrence of ideas within the data (ideas that have the same meaning but different wording), repetition (the existence of the same ideas using the same wording), and forcefulness (cues that reinforce a concept).

The research team considers the content analysis reliable because there was evidence of stability and reproducibility (Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2004). That is as a group the researchers noted very similar themes to those the researchers recorded individually. The group analysis of the data took place weeks following the individual analysis and the findings remained similar.

There were no instances of inter-coder conflict during the group process. There were times when different researchers labeled a concept with different terms that essentially meant the same thing. After brief debate the researchers selected the label that best expressed the concept.

### Findings

Predominant themes in the explanations student gave for withdrawing from their online graduate program fell into two major categories, personal reasons and program reasons. Personal reasons related to the student’s own life circumstances or work commitments. Program reasons related to preferences in learning style and a sense of evolving career aspirations. These themes are further illuminated through the following example of each. The findings are documented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1: Reasons for Withdrawing from Online Graduate Programs in Nursing and Health Studies**

PERSONAL REASONS	PROGRAM REASONS
1. Life Circumstances  2. Work Commitments	1. Learning Style  2. Evolving Career Aspirations

#### Personal Reasons

##### *Life Circumstances*

The most common explanation given for deciding to withdraw from the graduate program related to a personal unexpected life event such as health problems encountered by the student or a family member, higher than anticipated time required to meet the needs of family and friends, death of a family member, or unplanned financial pressures. For example one student wrote, “I had a car accident and I needed the money I had budgeted for tuition to pay my deductible.” Another said, “I can pull off the work and school balancing act but my family gets the short end

of the stick and I don't want to do this to them." Still one more participant commented, "The heavy family commitment of caring for mom has taxed me to the limit." Succinctly one student in remarking on the "competing urgencies of life circumstances" wrote, "I have learned to accept the fact that I am not superwoman." Another concluded, "I must make my family my first priority. Life takes many twists and turns you could never predict." In summary, this category of reasons largely came down to unforeseen life events.

### *Work Commitments*

One often cited personal reason for withdrawing from the program was the increased time requirement that came with a career change or increased workload in an existing professional role. As one student said, "I started a new job and it is taking far more time than I thought. I don't have enough extra time to devote to my studies." Another said, "my job has become more demanding as I have taken on new roles and I can't do it all." One final respondent discovered the competing pressures of work and school were not something that could be managed in tandem and wrote, "I now realize that I can only do one thing at a time. My work now has to take priority but when things calm down I will be back."

### **Program Reasons**

The CNHS graduate program is offered online via distance. It was evident in the comments that this particular medium was just not appropriate for all students and their preferred learning style. Others indicated different explanations for why this particular program was not appropriate for them.

### *Learning Style*

Some respondents clearly stated that the online method of learning did not accommodate the way they liked to learn. One student wrote, "I prefer the old-fashioned approach to instruction and an opportunity to engage in discussion with the professor and classmates face-to-face." Others found that they did not have the computer knowledge and levels of support required to study online. A student who had withdrawn wrote, "I am not comfortable enough with computers yet to learn fluently online." One student bluntly commented, "Online learning is not my style" and

another concluded with a comment that may reflect something more than their preferred learning style, “I am withdrawing because the program is just too hard to be taught via distance.”

### *Evolving Career Aspirations*

Some students came to know that the program they had enrolled in did not fit their career aspirations causing them to exit the program. For some this was only evident after they had taken several courses. One student’s email message said, “The program is not meeting my needs. I have come to see that I am not in the target group for this program. I should be clear that the program itself is probably fine but certainly geared towards nurses and not always open to other professionals.” Another said, “The nurse practitioner program is not appropriate for anyone who is already a nurse practitioner.” One more who was also in the nurse practitioner stream commented, “The nurse practitioner program is appropriate for a generalist and community health background but I want to focus my practice on women experiencing high risk pregnancy.” For some the program was not a match for specific career or learning goals and they did not discover this until after they had begun taking courses and interacting with professors and classmates.

Others changed careers during their time in the program making the course content, which was once relevant to their position, irrelevant. There were some who withdrew in order to enroll in another Athabasca University program, or a faculty at another university, that provided a program that fit more closely with new career responsibilities. One said, “I have been accepted into Medicine at McGill so I will be dropping out of this program.” Another more subtle career shift is reflected in this comment, “I have taken up a new position within the same organization so I need to take courses related to finance and human resources.” Still another student who dropped her program commented, “I have had a change of career direction and I need a thesis based Master’s program.”

Whatever the personal or program reason for leaving the program it seems deciding to withdraw is often not an easy decision. Many respondents described how difficult it was to make the decision to withdraw. For example one student said, “I have been putting this decision off for sometime now.” Another commented, “After much soul searching and deliberation I have

decided to withdraw.” As mentioned earlier over 30% of the students who withdrew from the program indicated they hoped to resume their studies in the program once the cause for their dropping out was resolved. This stated plan to resume studies was more consistently the case in situations where the withdrawal was related to personal life issues.

## Discussion

Rovai’s Composite Persistence Model (2002) includes student variables such as personal characteristics and skills as well as internal and external factors all which may impact persistence (or in the case of this study attrition) decisions. Some of the external and internal factors outlined in the CPM were represented in the findings of this study. In particular the external factors such as finances, hours of employment, family responsibly, and life crisis were reported by withdrawing students as reasons (direct or indirect) for their decision. Some factors identified in this study such as program fit, learning style, and clarity of the program would be categorized as internal factors in the Rovai model.

It is also informative to note that in this particular study there was no evidence that students withdrawing did so because of a perceived lack of social integration or absence of a learning community, two of Ravoi’s models key internal factors. In the distance learning medium a logical hypothesis might be that the virtual classroom is more limited in terms of social interaction and community experience. This was not the case in this study’s limited sample. Further study is needed to investigate this finding.

The majority of the reasons for withdrawing reported by participants in this study fit as external factors in Ravoi’s model. Students have limited or no control over external factors such as the demands of family responsibilities and life crises. They are often unforeseen and unpredictable factors. Once they occur their effects can be devastating to the student’s ability to focus on learning. With the graduate student population often being older with more “complex” lives involving children, older relatives, spouses, careers, and financial commitments it may be that the external factors category of the model has particular relevance for online graduate students.

It is possible that the findings of this study could be employed to extend or challenge the Ravoi CPM. For example, one finding in this study was the idea of “competing urgencies of life circumstances.” While isolated factors are recognized by Ravoi as influencing persistence decisions, perhaps a particular combination of several factors can compete and compound the stress levels of the student who then decides to withdraw. Maybe it is not so much specific individual factors that influence attrition but rather a layering of situations that eventually leads to withdrawal.

Another common reason for students in the study to leave the program related to changes in their career paths, making their current course content not useful. Whether they withdrew to enroll in another Athabasca University program, or in a faculty at another university in a program that fit more closely with new career responsibilities, the students said they moved because the program content was no longer relevant to their careers. This reason for leaving is not identified precisely in the Ravoi model possibly because it is incorporated within Ravoi’s notion of “goal commitment.” It might represent an additional external factor that could be added to the model. The new factor could be called “career stability.” This factor could be explained in this study because of the demographics of the students who are often older than undergraduate students and well established in their careers. Those who chose online programs usually pursue their degree over a period of several years while they continue to be employed. Given these factors it would not be uncommon for graduate students to be offered new positions during their time in the program. This change in career or position responsibilities could be a prompt for students to withdraw.

A fundamental unspoken assumption that may underlie this study is that attrition is negative, an indication that something did not work well either for the student or in the program.

Furthermore, this view of attrition supposes that if the problem can be discovered, it might be possible to “fix” it so attrition can be eliminated. Ravoi (2002) defined attrition as “departure from a program without successful completion.” This definition presents a connotation of attrition as failure. Yet, according to Glogowska, Young, and Lockyer (2007), many students who drop a class may do so because it is the right thing to do, in fact they are making a mature well informed decision that is consistent with a learner with significant academic and life

experience. Perhaps a certain level of attrition is healthy for students who are affected by personal life and work issues. Maybe it is a benefit for both the students, and the program at odds with their learning styles or career goals, if students withdraw voluntarily. Perhaps it is best for the stressed student, their classmates, and for the program as a whole if students who for some reason are not able to participate fully in courses decided to leave. These are important questions to consider when looking judgmentally at attrition levels and in deciding if, and how, measures need to be put in place to reduce these rates. Taking this alternative perspective about withdrawal being the “right” action in certain circumstances leads to a more focused examination of what the mechanisms need to be to smooth re-admittance to the program, and resumption of studies.

Additionally, some reasons for attrition cannot be altered such as those resulting from unpredictable, unchangeable situations. For example, if it is discovered that students are dropping out because they perceive the program to be inadequate, or the teaching inferior, these reasons for attrition must be attended to expediently. However, the majority of the reasons students gave for leaving the program in this study related to their own normal developmental transitions, life circumstances, career choices, or preferred styles of learning. The multiple life factors at play with some students was poignantly demonstrated when one said, “I could cope when my mom was sick and when the kids were needing attention, but when my own health started to fail I knew it was time to leave.” Personal situations related to life and work as reasons for withdrawing from an education program is comprehensible on an intuitive level and from a study conducted by Sydow and Sandel (1998) the two most significant causes for students leaving their college programs.

Due to the “open university” policy and the developmental stage of the students in the CNHS graduate program many of the students admitted to the program would be considered at-risk for withdrawal. As the number of at-risk students increase, retention rates have become a focal point for institutions of higher education (Harter & Szurminski, 2001; Johnson & Kreuzer, 2001). The findings of this study might point to some support systems that could be put in place to intercept and assist students at risk for withdrawing from their program of studies. But even with support and attrition prevention measures, the outcome might still be the same given the unexpected events and circumstances that are possible in every student’s life. However, it is important to

have measures to identify students at-risk for attrition and structures to support them given the possibility of the financial and emotional costs to both students and educational systems. The challenge is to identify students as early as possible who might be more at-risk for excessive personal or program demands. Once these students are identified mechanisms to support and assist them throughout the program must be put in place and genuine connections made with students to help them feel comfortable seeking and using such support if ever necessary. Knowing that support is available, and being able to ask for it, can be very different. If, with appropriate support and assistance, a student comes to the conclusion that withdrawal is indeed the best action to take, resources to ease the trauma involved in making this choice should be provided.

If students are leaving the program for program reasons related to career change it may be appropriate to counsel them out of the program. If the reason a student is considering withdrawing from the program relates to learning style disharmony then there may be some advantage to added technical assistance or further orientation to online learning to assist the person to become more comfortable with the electronic medium. It is acknowledged that online learning is not appropriate for all students, however given that studying via the Internet is still quite new to many learners in the demographic who are enrolled in the CNHS graduate programs it might be appropriate to seek ways to provide additional orientation to online learning before students begin the program.

The key message for instructors and advisors in online graduate programs is to get to know the students as individuals and be aware of the factors (external and internal) that may influence their experience studying online. This will be the means by which educators can be prepared to assist students most skillfully in making appropriate choices about staying in, or withdrawing from, graduate programs.

### **Conclusion**

The outcomes of this study provide a systematic analysis of student reported reasons for attrition in the CNHS graduate program at Athabasca University. With this evidence it will be possible to

consider what attrition factors in this particular graduate program are due to Centre and academic requirements, student reasons which cannot be altered, and those that might be addressed through further development of graduate student program and/or student support systems not yet in place. As a result of this study more is known about what influences online graduate program attrition. With a better understanding of student reasons for attrition in the CNHS graduate program, it will be possible to explore which program elements might be altered to improve the experience of online learning or to assist students in making informed choices about staying in a program. For these reasons the findings of this study are important to the successful functioning of our particular program.

More generally, the study findings contribute to the literature on graduate student attrition in online learning educational environments. Is it important to know the reasons why graduate students decide to leave the program early? Perhaps knowing some of the factors that influence attrition decisions is helpful to those who design and lead higher education programs guiding them to make improvements in course design, course delivery, and student support that could reduce rates of attrition and maximize use of resources. The findings of this study provide some background for strategies that might be put in place to minimize attrition.

Further this study broadens our thinking regarding attrition. Is it actually a negative outcome for the student and for the program or is it possible that a certain level of attrition in graduate education should be expected and planned for. Should all students be encouraged to persist with their studies or should supports be put in place to ease the early leaving of students who make this choice and processes developed to allow smooth reentry to the program of studies if they decide to continue at a later time?

This is a very limited study in terms of numbers of respondents. It is also limited in that it focuses on one program in one university. We acknowledge that we have only begun to explore the topic of attrition in online graduate education and that we have identified only a few of the potential factors that influence students' decisions to stay or go. Our goal was to begin the exploration of this topic by presenting our findings. We are hopeful they will motivate educators in other online educational facilities to investigate the attrition situation within their programs.

Further research that features a more in-depth investigation of the student experience (both those who do withdraw and those who consider withdrawing but decide to stay) would be enlightening. Further research that compares the attitudes and perceptions of those who consider withdrawing and decide to stay and those who decide to leave may help us explore this phenomenon more fully.

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