

## **IR Report**

### **Non-returner Survey: Why Students Leave**

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#### ***Abstract***

Prince George's Community College has regularly conducted the Non-Returner Survey since 2001. The survey is administered in the Fall to students who were enrolled in the previous Spring, but did not enroll or graduate in the following Fall semester. A new methodology used in Fall 2011 raised the survey response rate, saved resources, and yielded, for the first time, an actionable data set.

#### ***Introduction***

Prince George's Community College (PGCC) is a large suburban college located in Largo, Maryland, with a predominantly African American population. Offering a broad range of credit and non-credit programs, the College attracts over 40,000 credit and noncredit students annually. In Fall 2011, the College had a headcount of 14,647 credit students. The majority of these students were part-time (70%) and female (60%).

As do other Maryland community colleges, Prince George's Community College periodically surveys its non-returners, defined as those credit students who were enrolled in the Spring but did not return in the following Fall. There are two questions in the survey that are required for State reporting:

1. What was your main goal in attending PGCC in Spring 2011?
2. Do you believe you achieved the above goal at PGCC?

In the past, the methodology used by the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research (OPAIR) consisted of identifying all non-returners and then drawing a random sample of 1,000 students, who would receive the survey questionnaire by postal mail. Students who did not reply would receive a second mailing. Even with the second mailing, the survey had very low response rates. Between 84 and 160 respondents—or about 1.7-3% of the actual non-returner population—filled out the survey between 2001 and 2007. The low response rate severely limited the survey's utility and did not help identify non-returners' reasons for leaving.

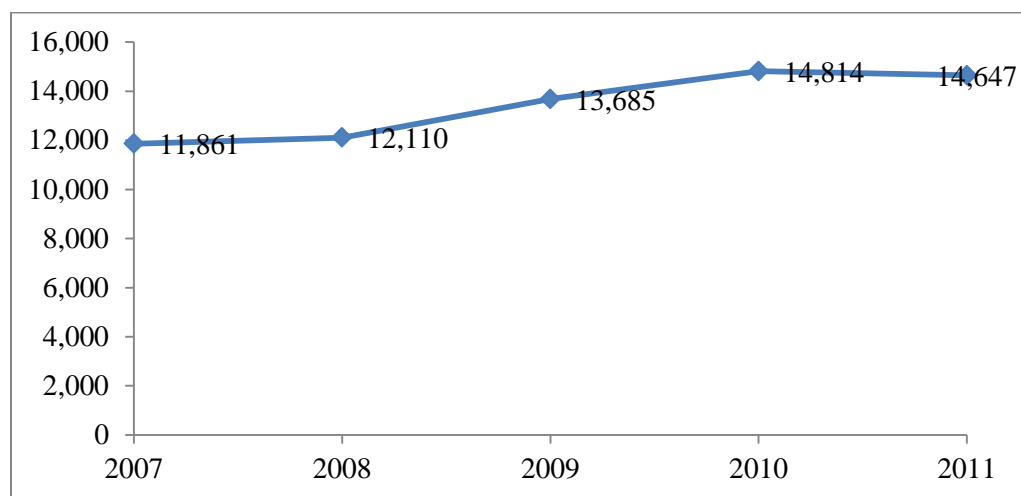
Moreover, the survey had little use to inform interventions aimed at reducing the non-returner population.

The purpose of this report is to underscore the importance of the non-returner survey in the context of the typical enrollment flow at PGCC, present a revamped methodology to survey non-returners, and discuss the survey findings and next steps to reduce the non-returner rate.

### ***PGCC Enrollment “Flow” and the Importance of Studying Non-Returners***

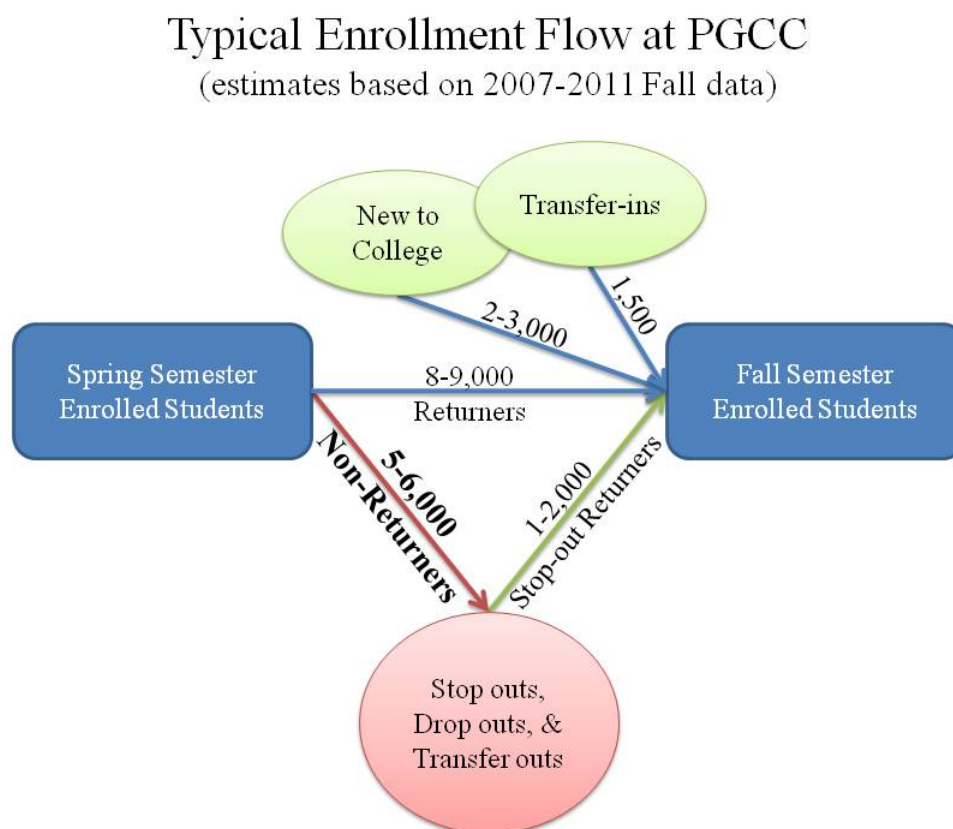
As background research for the survey, OPAIR examined the College’s enrollment trends from 2007 to 2012. As seen in Figure 1, PGCC’s Fall enrollment has been fairly consistent over time, notwithstanding a slight annual increase from 2008 to 2010.

Figure 1: PGCC Fall Credit Enrollment



However, the stability of overall enrollment trends is deceptive when the “flow” of students enrolling and not returning is not examined. An examination of the typical enrollment flow from the Spring to the Fall semester for 2007-2011 showed that each Spring the College loses 5,000 to 6,000 students, approaching 40% of the credit population. Despite the massive Spring exodus, the College manages to maintain its overall enrollment in the Fall by “replacing” the lost students with three sources of incoming students: students new to College, students who transfer into PGCC from other institutions, and students who renew their attendance after having stopped for one or more semesters (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: PGCC Enrollment Flow



Analyzing the student enrollment flow brought to the fore the previously overlooked loss and “replacement” of students from Spring to Fall. These data highlighted the need to learn more about the non-returned student population and take steps to reduce the non-returned rate.

### ***Revamping the Non-Returner Survey***

In fall 2011, OPAIR revamped the Non-returned Survey with the purpose of acquiring useful and actionable data. Instead of sending the survey through postal mail to a random sample of 1,000 students, an electronic survey was sent to all non-returned students with valid email addresses. After the initial email, four reminders were sent to those who had not yet responded. Reminders were sent on different days of the week and at different times during the day. All reminders produced an initial jump in the number of responses (though the size of this jump diminished over time).

In order to increase the Non-Returned Survey response rate, OPAIR relied on two strategies. The initial invitation to fill out the survey and all reminders were directly signed by PGCC President.

In addition, all respondents who filled out the survey within the first 25 days were entered into a raffle to win a \$50 gift card (with the exception of those who were employed by PGCC at the time of the survey). The survey was open for a month, but the majority of respondents (close to 72%) filled out the survey by the deadline for the raffle.

### ***Response Rate***

The Non-returning Student Survey was sent by email as an electronic questionnaire. Out of the initial population of students who did not return in Fall 2011, 6,265 actually received the questionnaire; the rest (169 students) had no email addresses on file or had invalid email addresses. From this pool, 964 (15.4%) responded, yielding more than six times the best response rate of previous non-returner surveys. An analysis of demographic and other data for the 964 respondents showed that:

- 70% were female
- They had a mean age of 34
- They attended a median of 6 semesters at PGCC
- They completed a median of 26 hours at PGCC
- 40% were currently attending another institution
- 70% were working
- 60% planned to return to PGCC

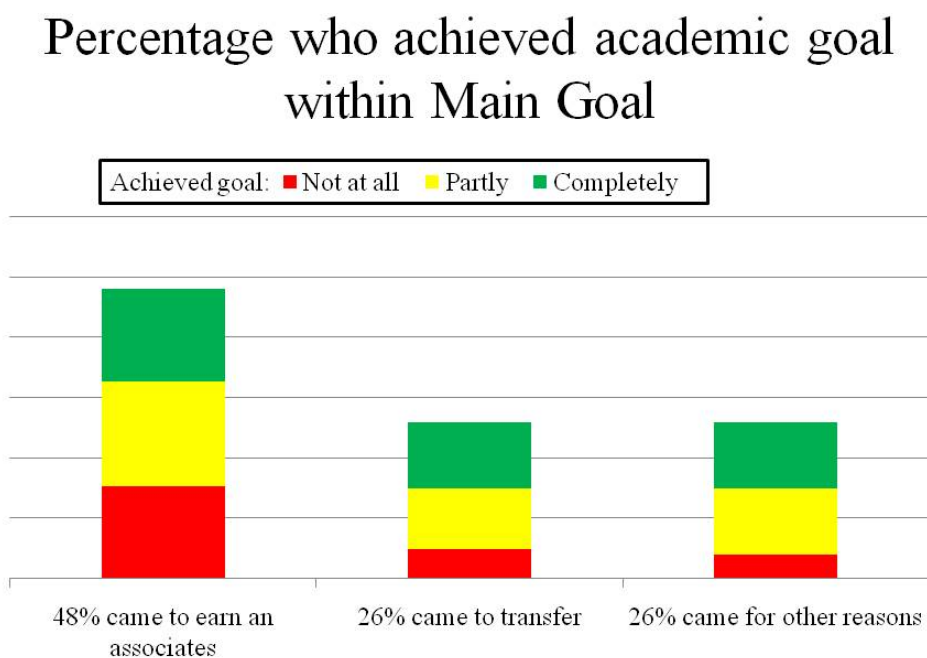
Although only the first three questions in the questionnaire were required, 96% of respondents completed the full survey. In addition, 65% of respondents chose to answer the open-ended question: “In what ways could PGCC better serve your educational needs?” As shown by these comments and by direct email replies sent by respondents, students valued the survey as an opportunity to convey their experiences, offer suggestions, and even ask for assistance to resume their college attendance.

### ***Findings: What we learned about non-returners***

An analysis of the mandatory questions showed that nearly 50% of non-returners came to PGCC to earn an associate’s degree, whereas smaller percentages came to transfer (26%) or for other reasons (26%). Among those who came to PGCC for an associate’s degree, one third (33%) did not achieve their goal, one third partially achieved their goal, and one third achieved their goal completely (see Figure 3). Among those who came to PGCC to transfer or for other reasons (e.g., update skills, personal enrichment, etc.), the rate of students not completing their goals was significantly smaller, around 15%. Thus, more non-returners came to PGCC to obtain an

associate's than to transfer or for other reasons. However, those seeking an associate's were significantly less likely to achieve their academic goal.

Figure 3



In addition to the mandatory questions, the survey asked students about any hurdles which may have prevented them from returning to the college in the Fall semester. The students ranked these potential barriers as “major reasons,” “minor reasons,” and “not a reason” for not enrolling in the Fall (see Table 1). Approximately one third of respondents reported leaving because they had achieved their academic goal or transferred to another institution. Examining only those students who reported leaving without obtaining their educational goal or transferring, the factors identified by most students as a “major reason” for leaving were not having money to enroll (43%), personal problems (38%), being unhappy with one’s academic progress (25%), and being unhappy with the College’s services for students (25%).

Table 1

Item	% Major Reason
I did not have the money to enroll.	43
I could not attend college due to personal problems.	38
I was unhappy with my academic progress.	26
I was unhappy with the services for students at PGCC.	25

Equally important, the survey helped identify factors that *were not perceived* by students as reasons for leaving. Surprisingly, these factors included being unable to find childcare, lack of transportation, moving away from the area, and being unhappy with activities for students at the College. In all these cases, 85% of respondents or more indicated that the listed item was “not a reason” for leaving (see Table 2).

Table 2

Item	% Not a Reason
I could not find child care so that I could attend classes.	88
I could not get to campus due to lack of transportation.	85
I moved away from the area.	85
I needed a break from school.	77
The classes or programs I wanted were not available.	76
My educational goal changed.	75

### ***Student Feedback in response to the Open-Ended Question***

As stated earlier, one of the impressive elements of the 2011 Non-Returner Survey dataset was that 65% of respondents typed answers to the open-ended question. A quick review of open-ended responses showed that most were detailed and somewhat lengthy. Given the richness of these data, students’ comments were coded and analyzed with NVivo, a qualitative research software program. The analysis was conducted in three stages:

Stage 1: Tentative categories were formulated based on a preliminary review of all comments.

Stage 2: All comments were coded based on the tentative categories. As part of this process, the categories were reformulated to achieve a better fit with the data.

Stage 3: Some categories were merged and others eliminated based on the type of comments and the number of quotes included in each category. All comments were then recoded using the final set of categories. The analysis focuses on the four categories in the final set that contained the larger number of comments.

The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 3. As shown in the table, roughly a quarter of comments reflected positive experiences with the College. However, there were also areas where students found barriers to success. Slightly over 25% of comments cited lack of responsiveness to student issues and concerns, including problems in specific areas such as advising and financial aid as well as more generalized concerns with interdepartmental communication and customer service. A much smaller but still sizeable set of concerns (13%)

addressed the lack of available courses at times that would fit students' schedules. The last set of comments (8%) had to do with students' difficulties paying for college and requests for greater flexibility or assistance in this area.

Table 3: Analysis of students' comments (summary)

<b>Main categories (may overlap)</b>	<b>Percent of all comments</b>	<b>Subcategories <i>within</i> main category (may overlap)</b>
Positive comments about PGCC	26%	<i>Goal achievement</i>
		<i>Encompassing positive experience</i>
		<i>Positive experiences with faculty</i>
		<i>No complaints</i>
Lack of college responsiveness	28%	<i>Problems with academic advising</i>
		<i>Problems with financial aid</i>
		<i>Problems with faculty</i>
		<i>General problems with college responsiveness</i>
Lack of course availability	13%	<i>Locations, times, days, and frequency</i>
		<i>More online or hybrid courses</i>
Affordability	8%	

Students' responses to the open-ended question offered a unique glance at their experiences with academic and nonacademic services. Understanding non-returners' perspectives is an essential step in any successful effort to remove hurdles to student success. A more detailed account of the main classes of comments and subcategories is presented below.

*Main category: Positive Comments*

Even though the wording of the question prompted respondents to think about ways to improve PGCC, over a quarter of those who did respond (26%) had positive things to say about the college. There were four subcategories of positive comments:

- Subcategory 1: Goal achievement  
Some students thanked the college for helping them achieve their educational goals. Students in this group had a variety of goals: preparing for transfer to a four-year university, completing one course or a few courses for a degree pursued at another institution, completing a class needed for teacher certification, or simply updating their skills.
- Subcategory 2: Encompassing positive experience

Some students declared explicitly that they had a positive experience at PGCC. In some cases, students praised the institution as a whole without providing further details. In other cases, students detailed specific aspects that they valued at the college, including their classes, the service received, the broad range of programs, and the flexible schedule.

- **Subcategory 3: Positive experiences with faculty**  
Some students emphasized their positive experiences with faculty. Students in this group thanked PGCC faculty for believing in them, for helping them achieve their educational and career goals, and for assisting them with specific course challenges and skills.
- **Subcategory 4: No complaints**  
Some students simply declared or implied that they had no complaints about their experience at PGCC. Students in this group used words such as “fine,” “OK,” and “fair” to characterize PGCC and/or their experience at the college. In some cases, students clarified that it was external reasons or personal problems, rather than something to do with the institution itself, which led to a temporary break in college attendance.

*Main Category: Lack of College responsiveness*

Over a quarter of those who responded to the open-ended question (28%) were not satisfied with the level or the quality of support they received at the college. In some cases, students complained about the customer service received at the college. In others, students expressed a need for greater empathy, additional help, or stronger guidance as they negotiated the challenges of their academic and personal lives. There were four subcategories of comments about the lack of college responsiveness:

- **Subcategory 1: Problems with academic advising**  
Some students complained about their experience with academic advising. Students expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as unfriendly staff and long waits. They also complained about having received incorrect advice as well as inconsistent advice from different advisors. Finally, students regretted having received insufficient guidance, with negative consequences down the road.
- **Subcategory 2: Problems with financial aid**  
As it happened with academic advising, some students were dissatisfied with what they perceived as unfriendly staff and long waiting times in the financial aid office. Others complained about insufficient guidance regarding the application process, eligibility criteria, and funding opportunities. In addition, students complained about not having received proper notification regarding important requirements and deadlines. Finally,



students perceived a lack of empathy and leniency towards those facing difficult life circumstances.

- **Subcategory 3: Problems with faculty**  
Some students complained about their experiences with faculty. Students expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as a lack of connection between students and faculty. In their view, some faculty members knew the materials but did not know or did not care enough about their students. Students complained also about insufficient support and guidance with in-class learning and take-home assignments. Finally, some students who struggled with academic or personal problems expressed a need for greater empathy and understanding from instructors.
- **Subcategory 4: General problems with college responsiveness**  
Some respondents complained about poor customer service and inadequate support for students in specific areas outside of academic advising, financial aid, or the classroom. Others felt that the problems with college responsiveness were systemic and thus exceeded a particular group of people or a specific department.

*Main Category: Lack of Course availability*

Almost 13% of those who responded to the open-ended question had suggestions and complaints about course availability. There were two subcategories of comments about course availability:

- **Subcategory 1: Locations, times, days, and frequency**  
For some students, it was a problem that classes were not available at specific locations, at specific times (especially in the evening), or on specific days to better fit their schedule. Other students expressed frustration at the fact that courses required for their programs were not offered regularly, which unnecessarily extended the time needed for completion. Students who expressed concerns about course availability often mentioned these problems in reference to upper-level courses or courses needed in the later stages of their programs.
- **Subcategory 2: More online or hybrid courses**  
Some students expressed an interest in greater availability of online or hybrid courses. It is important to note that within the whole group of comments about course availability, comments referring specifically to online or hybrid courses were in the minority.

### Main Category: Affordability

Close to 8% of those who responded to the open-ended question were concerned about college affordability and most of them expressed a need for greater financial assistance. In particular, students were interested in grants, scholarships, and work/study options. Some of these comments reflect a need for better information and guidance about available financial aid opportunities and the process of applying for grants and scholarships. Some students may not be aware of the competitive nature and stringent requirements often associated with the disbursement of grant funds.

### ***Summary and next steps***

Since 2001, PGCC has surveyed non-returners, defined as those credit students who had attended classes in the Spring but did not re-enroll the following Fall. However, the College had approached the survey more as a mandatory reporting requirement than as an intentional effort to collect actionable data.

In 2011, OPAIR conducted an analysis of the typical student flow at PGCC as background research for that year's Non-Returner Survey. This analysis showed that 5,000 to 6,000 students enrolled in the Spring typically leave the following Fall. Interventions which might retain even 10-20% of the 6,000 potential non-returners would result in a 4-8% increase in Fall enrollments. Furthermore, aiding students who are at risk of exiting across these two semesters would likely have an impact on completion rates as well.

In order to learn more about non-returners, OPAIR adopted a new methodology to conduct the 2011 Non-Returner Survey. The new methodology dramatically increased the response rate from the low single digits to 15.4%. Furthermore, the survey produced high-quality data as shown by the high proportion of students completing the survey and providing detailed comments in response to the open-ended question. The new methodology had the additional advantage of saving resources when compared to the traditional method of sending repeated mailings to a subset of non-returners.

By ensuring high student participation and engagement with the survey, the new methodology produced a wealth of information about non-returners' experiences with academic and nonacademic services. In addition, the survey helped to identify major hurdles and constraints faced by these students, which could inform interventions to reduce the non-returner rate. The ensuing follow-up actions were proposed:

1. Focus on removing barriers in those areas identified by most students as "major reasons" for not returning, including assisting students in applying and staying eligible for financial aid, helping students experiencing lack of academic progress, and improving nonacademic services.

2. Improve internal communication and customer service to make the college more “responsive” to student issues and concerns.
3. Reach out to students before they leave. The Non-Returner Survey focuses on students who have already stopped attending the College, at least temporarily. As a complement, an “intervention survey” should be conducted in the Spring to identify those students who are considering not returning, connect them with College services, and remove barriers to their continued enrollment and success.