

2002 ACT Withdrawing/Nonreturning Student Survey Summary Report

Executive Summary

- ❖ Respondents were satisfied with most academic and general environmental characteristics of the college. Not included in this category, however, were characteristics that indicate efficiency, individual service, and personal attention.
- ❖ Dissatisfaction was expressed with enrollment services, preparation for a future occupation, and availability of instructors outside of class.
- ❖ Reasons for leaving LaGuardia were multiple and cumulative. Most had to do with financial difficulty, frustration or dissatisfaction with institutional services, health or other personal complicating factors, and academic difficulty.
- ❖ 82% said Co-Op was “not a reason” for leaving LaGuardia.
- ❖ At the same time, 38% said the time requirement for Co-Op was a concern, and 47% said the potential conflict with a current job was a concern.
- ❖ Most respondents (74%) planned to re-enroll in college in the coming year; nearly half (44%) planned to re-enroll at LaGuardia.
- ❖ Less than half (45%) said they had invested *very much* effort in their studies.
- ❖ About half said attending LaGuardia had increased their aspirations and improved their computer literacy.

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Methodology

Of the 9,580 degree-seeking students enrolled in Fall 2001, 2,597 did not return to LaGuardia in Spring 2002 and had not graduated, and of those, 2290 were first-time students. Those leavers were sent a questionnaire, using the ACT Withdrawing/ Nonreturning Student Survey (appendix 1). As is commonly the case when surveying non-attending populations, many questionnaires were returned by the post office as being undeliverable. Two survey attempts and a follow-up post card eventually yielded 196 responses, or just under 10 percent of the 2,057 people who were sent a questionnaire.

Largely due to the low response rate, respondents differed from Fall 2001 leavers in several ways, as shown the *Comparative Sample and Population Characteristics* on page v . Respondents were older, included more women, a higher percentage of Hispanics, and a higher percentage of former ESL students compared to Fall 2001 leavers in general.

Because there is little incentive, and under the circumstances, potentially even less inclination for recipients to take the time to fill out a questionnaire, quite low response rates are, unfortunately, typical of leavers surveys. This restricts the ability to generalize findings to the whole leaver population. But the survey results can still yield valuable information.

In this case, nearly 200 former students gave us a substantial amount of information about their initial plans, their perceptions of the college, and their reasons for leaving, and nearly 100 took the time to add additional written comments. Such numbers are not inconsequential, and the information obtained from their responses opens a window that has not been readily available to us before. While they may not be representative of the opinions of *all* LaGuardia leavers, the findings in this report provide important insights into the college leaving behavior of our students.

Overview

Because the national sample of nonreturning students comes largely from the senior college sector, LaGuardia respondents have a rather different profile from those in the national sample. The differences between the two groups are reflected in both the Reasons for Leaving and the Satisfaction with College Services and Characteristics sections of the survey. In this instance, therefore, it is more useful to discuss what the survey tells us about the LaGuardia leavers who responded, irrespective of how well or poorly they compare to the national user sample.

Several important findings emerge from this survey, and many of these resonate in other survey findings of different LaGuardia populations. The most important information concerns the reasons why students leave. Interestingly, no reason was indicated as being Major by more than 27 percent of respondents (this was also true of the national sample). Several reasons were also indicated by a substantial percentage as being Minor. This suggests that students do not make an abrupt decision to leave college because of a single, crucial change in circumstance or attitude. Rather, it appears more likely that events or circumstances accumulate until they reach a critical point beyond which students are no longer able, or perhaps willing, to continue.

Two of the most frequently-cited Major reasons for leaving were financial:

- 1) prohibitively-high tuition and fees;
- 2) the appearance of unexpected expenses.

Given the far-reaching effects of financial constraint, two additional reasons cited as being Major might also be interpreted as financial:

- 3) health-related problems, of oneself or a family member;
- 4) conflict between job and college.

Independently, it is conceivable that these difficulties might be managed, but occurring together they are likely to pose an insurmountable problem.

Besides financial concerns, nonreturning students indicated certain institutional factors as having contributed significantly to the decision to leave. These were:

- 5) their desired major was not offered;
- 6) academic advising was inadequate;
- 7) class scheduling problems arose.

If the decision to leave is, in effect, an accumulation of difficulties and frustrations which, combined, become intolerable, then any one of these reasons could well be the determining factor for any number of leavers.

Overview (continued)

Reasons cited as having contributed in a lesser way also shed light on the processes involved in deciding to leave. Significant percentages of LaGuardia leavers cited Minor reasons that can be grouped into two categories similar to those above, and one new one:

- 1) finances;
- 2) frustration with institutional factors;
- 3) academic difficulty.

The added dimension of academic uncertainty that is evident in many students' Minor reasons for not returning to LaGuardia would surely compound the stresses and frustrations arising from most of the Major reasons they indicated, continuous financial juggling and unsatisfactory institutional services, making it even more critical to resolve these practical problems early.

On the positive side, there is ample evidence in this survey that many leavers perceive their attendance at LaGuardia to have been beneficial, in both psychological and practical terms. For example, a majority said their aspirations in life had increased as a result of being at LaGuardia, and a large number experienced a great improvement in computer literacy. One important finding concerns Co-Op. When asked if LaGuardia's Cooperative Education requirement was a reason for leaving, the great majority, 82 percent, said it was not -- only 8 percent said it was a Major reason and a similarly low number said it was a Minor one.

Another encouraging finding is that not all students who leave LaGuardia have made the decision to leave higher education, or even LaGuardia, permanently. Nearly three-quarters of the leavers who responded to this survey said their plans for the coming year were to enroll in college, and just under half said they planned to return to LaGuardia. This corresponds to typical patterns in higher education at the present time. It is widely understood that the road to college completion, particularly for community college students, is regrettably long and frequently interrupted. According to a 1998 report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 42 percent of community college students leave in the first year. (LaGuardia's first-year attrition rate is 35 percent.) The report goes on to say that half of community college leavers return to college within five years, and among those who return, more than half (57 percent) return to the same institution. However, these students' ultimate outcomes remain troubling. Within five years, only half of leavers who returned to the same institution had earned a credential or were still pursuing one (U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, NCES 1999-087, Laura J. Horn). In this survey of leavers, fully 75 percent had expected to graduate from LaGuardia. The college's five-year graduation rate is 25 percent. Another 23 percent of survey respondents expected to transfer to a senior college before graduating. These expectations are more closely met, since within a six-year period, 19 percent of LaGuardia students transfer early.

Overview (continued)

The findings from this survey suggest three areas in which LaGuardia should focus its efforts to help students remain in college. The first is tuition assistance. Some form of relief from the semester-to-semester struggle to meet full tuition expenses would impact more than students' financial difficulties: It would likely reduce stress, free-up valuable time, and improve concentration, all potential contributors to leaving behavior.

The second area is better enrollment services, including course availability and academic advising. Enrollment processes such as admission, registration, testing, and financial aid must be made timely, effective, and convenient. The number of campus visits and the time required to complete the business of enrollment should be minimized. The amount of time available for students to consult with faculty, counselors, or others for academic purposes -- and the accuracy of the advice or information they receive -- should be maximized. Finally, the interpersonal relations between college staff and students should be consistently friendly, efficient, and personal.

The third and perhaps most challenging focus is an improved pace at which students make progress. While the academic challenges many students face at the college complicate this task, it is apparent from this and other data that lack of concrete progress toward educational and career goals is generally tolerated for no longer than two or three semesters. To improve persistence, in addition to providing financial assistance and effective services, the college must increase opportunities for real advancement toward career goals in the first year of enrollment.

Most students who left LaGuardia felt constrained to do so, if not by their inability to pay the tuition, then because they were discouraged, frustrated, or had too many competing responsibilities. Some of those who left will re-enroll at LaGuardia, but carrying the same difficulties in tow, their chances for success remain slim. Diminishing obstacles such as those uncovered in this and similar studies would go a long way toward making real the promise of opportunity that community college represents for so many.

Comparative *Sample* and *Population* Characteristics

	Respondents (N=196)	All Fall 2001 Leavers (N=2597)
Gender		
Females	73.1%	59%
Males	26.9%	41%
Valid responses	171	2597
Age		
17	0.0%	0.6%
18	3.5%	5.8%
19	8.2%	9.7%
20	8.2%	12.8%
21-25	32.7%	39.0%
26-35	28.1%	22.6%
36 and over	19.3%	9.6%
Average age	28	25
Valid responses	171	2592
GED recipient	7.6%	8.2%
Valid responses	171	2597
Ethnic Origin		
Asian	16.4%	13.2%
Black	14.0%	18.6%
Hispanic	38.6%	36.1%
White	12.3%	4.8%
Other	5.3%	16.7%
Unknown	13.5%	10.3%
Valid responses	171	2597
High School Average		
Less than 70	10.1%	21.3%
70 to 79	62.8%	59.7%
80 to 89	25.6%	16.0%
90 to 100	1.6%	2.9%
Valid responses	129	1739
Writing Score		
Mean score on scale of 2 to 10	5.5	5.7
Valid responses	155	2344

Comparative *Sample* and *Population* Characteristics (continued)

	<u>Respondents</u>	All Fall 2001 <u>Leavers</u>
Math Score		
Mean score on scale of 1 to 40	21.9	22.4
Valid responses	154	2347
ESL	47.1%	32.1%
Valid responses	155	2344

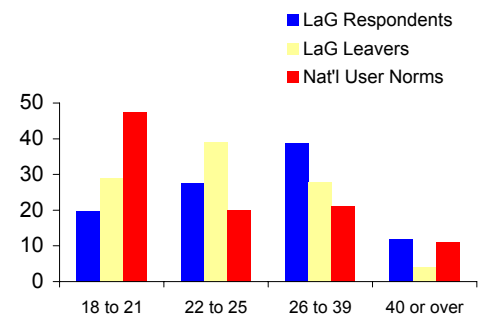
ACT Withdrawing/Nonreturning Student Survey Spring 2002

Section I Background

As shown below and on page v, compared to all Fall 2001 LaGuardia leavers, respondents were older, on average, and included a higher percentage of Hispanics and of women. LaGuardia respondents also had a different profile from those in the national survey sample, which can be explained partly by the fact that most students in the national sample had left four-year colleges or universities.

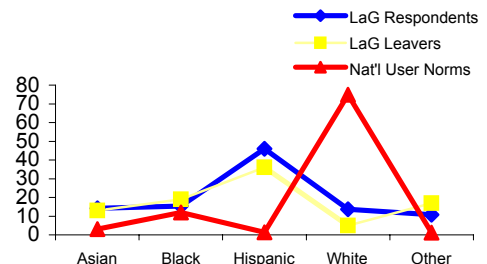
Age

	LaGuardia Respondents	LaGuardia Leavers	National User Norms
18 to 21	20%	29%	47%
22 to 25	28%	39%	20%
26 to 39	39%	28%	21%
40 or over	12%	4%	11%



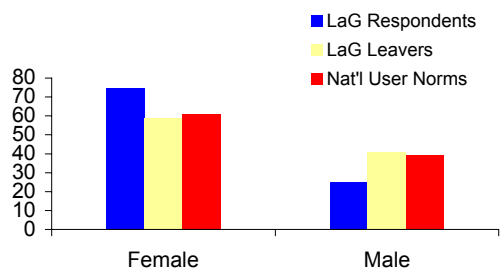
Race and Ethnic Origin

	LaGuardia Respondents	LaGuardia Leavers	National User Norms
Asian	14%	13%	3%
Black	15%	19%	12%
Hispanic	46%	36%	1%
White	14%	5%	75%
Other	11%	17%	1%



Sex

	LaGuardia Respondents	LaGuardia Leavers	National User Norms
Female	75%	59%	61%
Male	25%	41%	39%

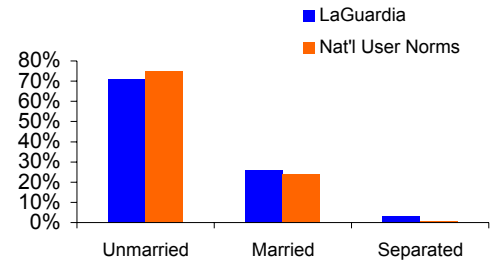


Section I

Background (continued)

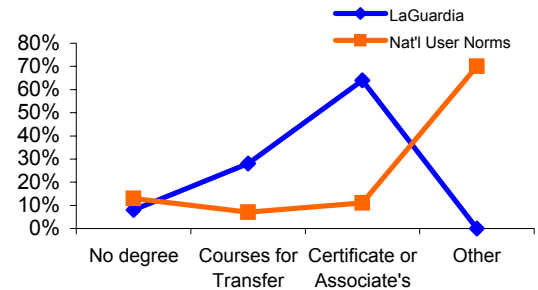
Marital Status

	LaGuardia Respondents	National User Norms
Unmarried	71%	75%
Married	26%	24%
Separated	3%	1%



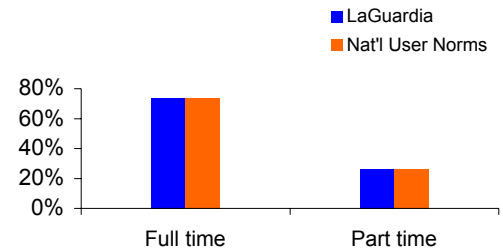
Purpose for Entering This College

	LaGuardia Respondents	National User Norms
No degree	8%	13%
Courses for Transfer	28%	7%
Certificate or Associate's	64%	11%
Other	0%	70%



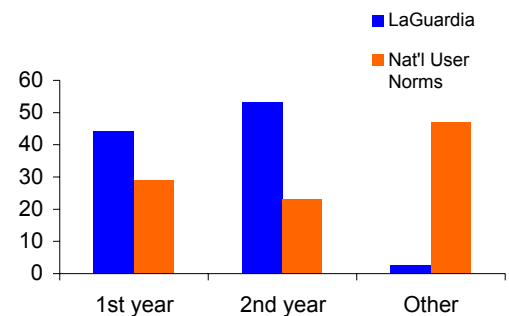
Primary Enrollment Status

	LaGuardia Respondents	National User Norms
Full time	74%	74%
Part time	26%	26%



Class Level at Leaving

	LaGuardia Respondents	National User Norms
1st year	44%	29%
2nd year	53%	23%
Other	3%	47%

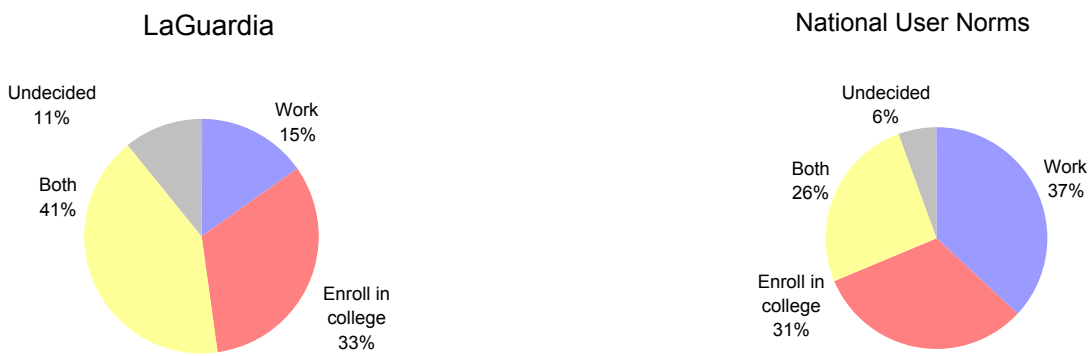


Section I

Background (continued)

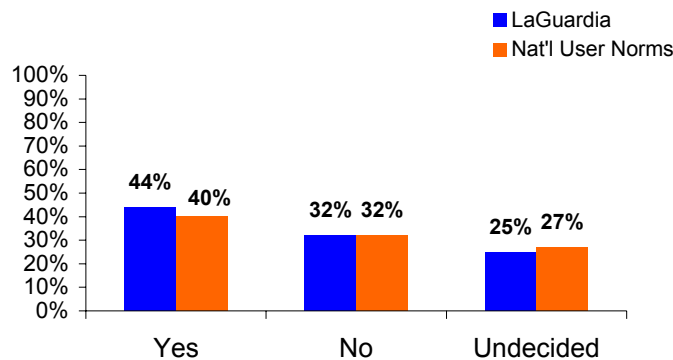
Plans for the Coming Year

A much larger portion of LaGuardia leavers planned to return to college in the coming year compared to the national sample. This fact, together with the larger portion of leavers whose plans were still undecided, suggests that LaGuardia leavers may consist more of "stop-outs" than "stay-outs." More LaGuardia leavers planned also to work when back in college.



Plan to Re-enroll at This College?

While nearly three-quarters of LaGuardia leavers said they would return to college, somewhat fewer planned to return to LaGuardia; that number was 44 percent. Another quarter were still undecided.

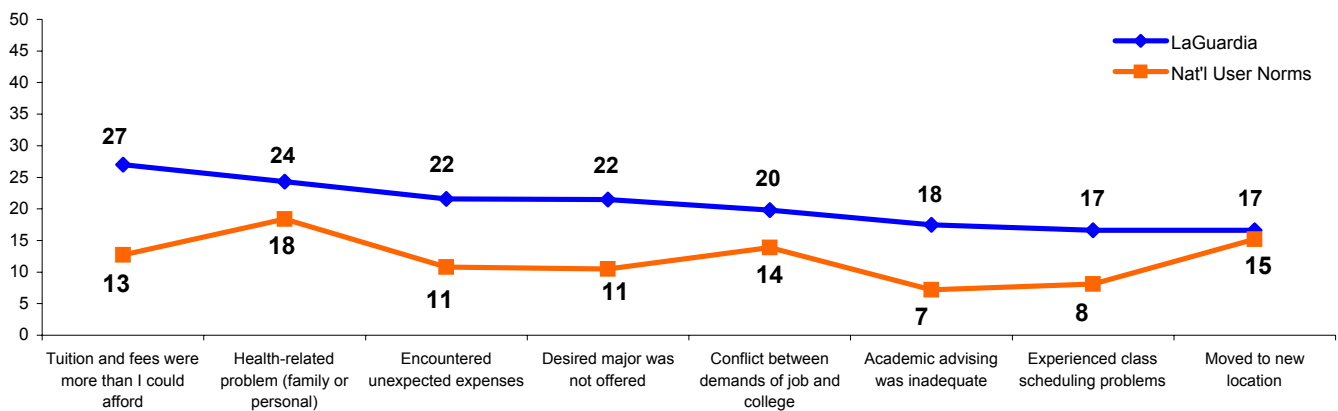


Section II

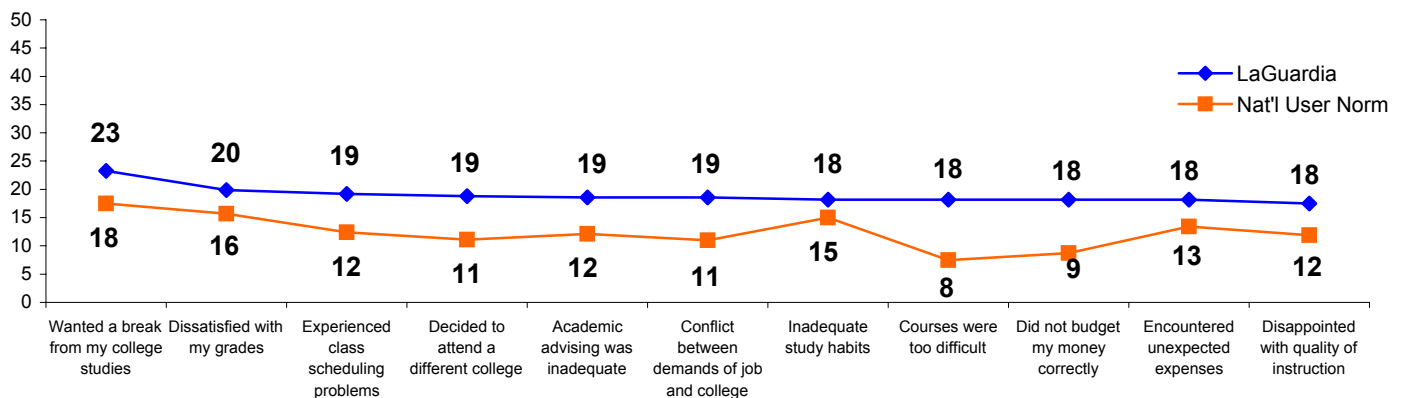
Reasons for Leaving

Although there was no single, overriding reason why most students said they left LaGuardia, the largest numbers of nonreturning students indicated several major reasons: They were financially unable to continue; they had health-related problems to take care of, their own or a family member's; the desired major was not offered at LaGuardia; and the demands of work and going to college conflicted. None of the major reasons indicated by LaGuardia students were selected by as many students in the national user sample.

Major Reason



Minor Reason

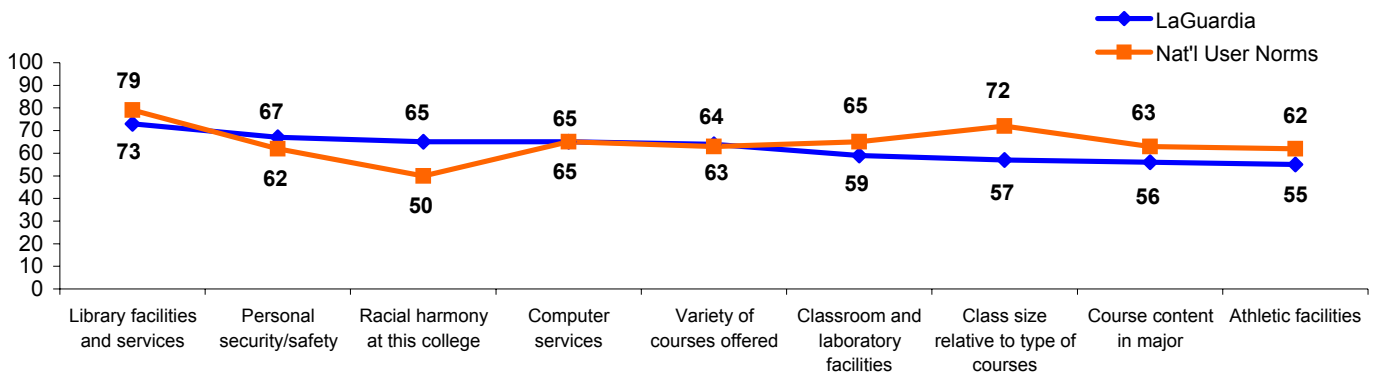


Section III

Satisfaction with College Services and Characteristics

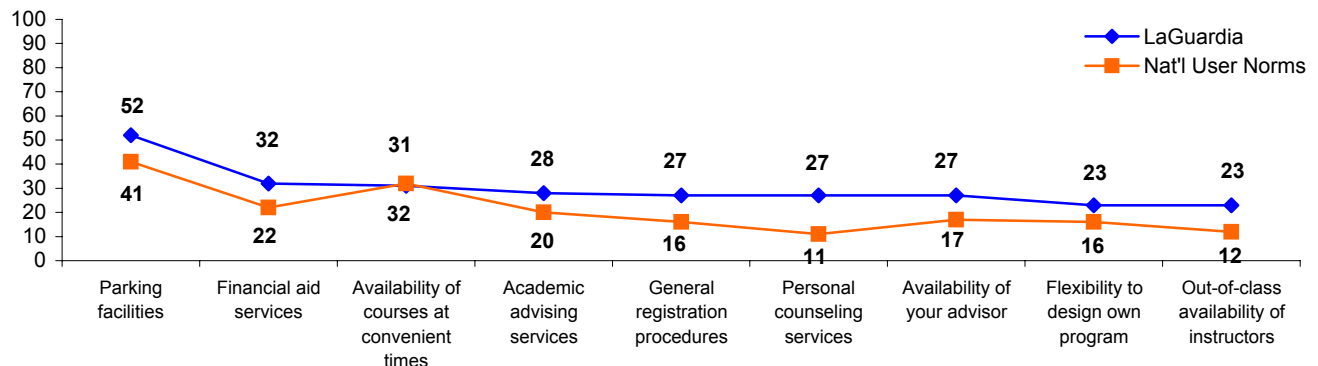
Most students were happy with important aspects of the academic as well as the general environment at LaGuardia. Students felt the college was safe, racially harmonious, modern, and comfortable. Academically, they show satisfaction with the Library, the variety of courses offered, and course content in the major. Absent from this listing, however, are characteristics of the college that indicate efficiency, individual service, and personal attention, as shown below.

Satisfied or Very Satisfied



While the percentages of students indicating dissatisfaction are much lower than those indicating satisfaction, they are significant and warrant serious attention. Excluding parking facilities, more than a quarter of nonreturning students, on average, express outright dissatisfaction with several critical college services. Financial aid services lead the list, followed closely by course availability, academic advising, registration procedures, personal counseling, and availability of advisor. In addition, students cite flexibility to design their own program, and the availability of instructors outside of class, as lacking.

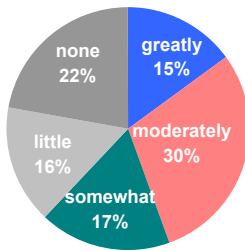
Dissatisfied or Very Dissatisfied



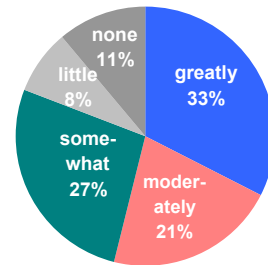
Outcomes from Having Attended

The majority of nonreturning students said they had obtained benefits from having attended LaGuardia. Most students' aspirations in life increased (15 percent *greatly*) and most students' computer literacy improved (33 percent *greatly*). Less than half of leavers, however, said they had put *very much* effort into their studies while at the college, although 37 percent said they had put *some*. Most leavers, 75 percent, had expected to graduate from LaGuardia.

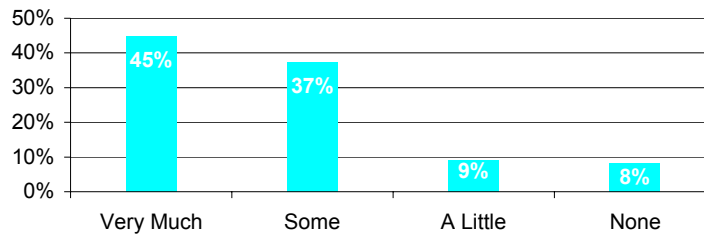
Aspirations in Life Increased



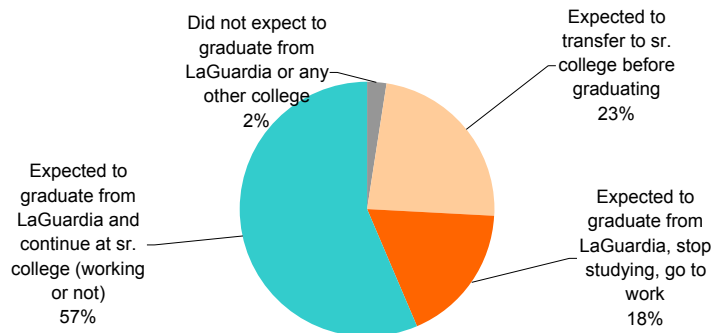
Computer Literacy Improved



Personal Effort Invested



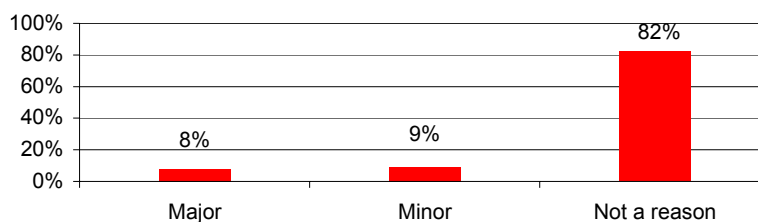
Initial Plans and Expectations



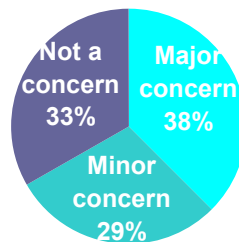
Co-Operative Education Experience

Although most respondents had not yet taken a Co-Op internship, less than 20 percent said the Co-Op requirement was even a *minor* reason for leaving. Leavers did express having had some concern about the time that Co-Op would involve, and, perhaps even more so, that Co-Op would conflict with a currently-held job.

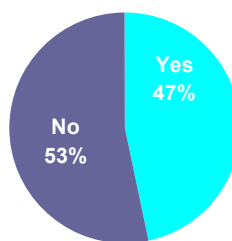
Co-Op Requirement as a Reason for Leaving



Time Requirement as a Concern



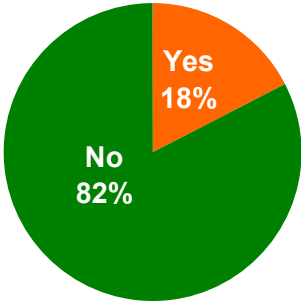
Conflict with Job as a Concern



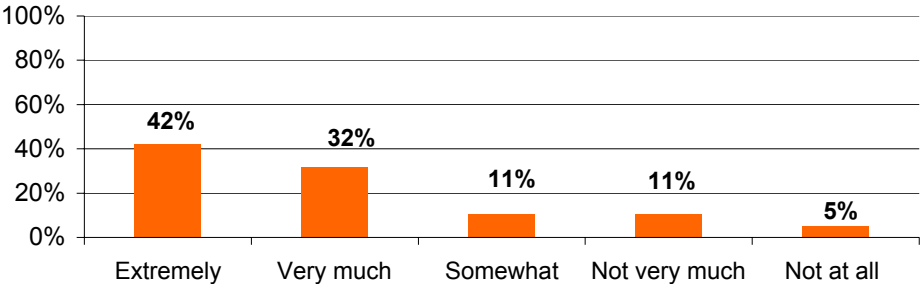
Co-Operative Education Experience (continued)

While only about 20 percent of respondents (35 students) had taken a Co-Op internship, the large majority of those who did said it had been *very* or *extremely beneficial*.

Experienced a Co-Op Internship?



Among those who did, How beneficial was it?



Written Comments

Half of the survey respondents included written comments with their responses, which can be organized into six main categories: Academic, Financial, Enrollment Services, Work-related, Personal or Health-related, and General.

About 19 percent of comments were quite positive, with roughly one-quarter of those specifically citing good experiences with teachers, courses, or programs. Examples of these include:

- *The experience at LaGuardia was good. The professors were excellent.
- *LaGuardia has a great program for people who need ESL.
- *My experience at LaGuardia has helped me improve my education in the computer field.
- *The internship is one of the most important classes a student can take.

Most other positive comments concerned the college in general, such as:

- *LaGuardia is a great college.
- *LaGuardia College is one of the good colleges in the City of New York.

A large number, however, 44 percent, conveyed negative experiences, for example with teachers, courses, and enrollment services. These are some examples:

- *Some of the evening classes do not teach enough. In one of my... classes I spent a few hours and I only learned a little. I feel frustrated and disappointed that I came to school and I really want to learn something that is useful. Unfortunately, that is not what I [experienced].
- *The college needs to hire teachers who can speak English...
- *I left the college because all the courses...were wasting my time. I was doing remedial classes, e.g., ESL [but] English is not my second language. I also think there was a problem with my placement exam. When I went to get my result but they could not find it.
- *There are teachers who are not even vaguely familiar with the subjects they are being asked to teach the students.
- *The staff need to be more knowledgeable on student matters.

Written Comments (continued)

*The employees at LaGuardia college are so rude.

*The biggest flaw with LaGuardia is its staff...They need to improve customer service relations.

Other comments expressed more generalized discontent, such as:

*The college is very disorganized.

*Some professors are very unprofessional. Most of the... staff are very rude and they all usually don't know what to do at their jobs. I suggest that you train them to be more professional. ...Also, the computer lab and library needs more improvement, such as more accessible computers, more resources, and polite assistants. Bathrooms are too dirty all the time. Security is doing fine at their job.

Most of the remaining comments (about 10 percent) indicated that health or other personal problems led to departure, with several expressing the desire to return.

As many as 20 percent of comments had something to do with financial difficulties, including the inability to qualify for financial aid. Financial aid concerns were sometimes combined with complaints about having been "dropped" from courses at the last minute.

Following are some examples:

*Wanted to continue my studies but financial aid was not approved.

*I withdrew from LaGuardia because I lost my financial aid and owed the college and could not afford to pay.

*My discontinuing classes at LaGuardia had nothing to do with the college. It was because of financial reasons.

*LaGuardia did not help me. Actually, I was withdrawn from my classes and I have no credits, my financial aid was taken from me, and now I have to pay the college \$450 that I do not have.

*Wish to go back to college but have too many problems at this time.