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## The Profile of “Last-Minute Leavers”:

An Initial Data Exploration



**Institutional Research**

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

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## Executive Summary

The University of Georgia's first-time full-time freshmen graduation rate has been relatively high. The average six-year graduation rate of UGA's comparator peers for Fall 2005 cohort was 72%<sup>1</sup>, while UGA's six-year graduation rates have been almost 10 percentage points higher<sup>2</sup>, ranging from 80% to 83% in the past five years (fall first-time full-time cohorts 2002-2006). In answering to the calls of Complete College Georgia, UGA faces the challenge that its six-year graduation rates seem to have reached a plateau. How can UGA's graduation rate go from high to higher? In order to assist the University to overcome the plateau effect of high graduation rates, an investigation of last-minute leavers was conducted. This is a report of the major findings from the study.

Last-minute leavers refer to students who left the University prior to completing their baccalaureate degree after earning 90 or more academic credit hours. The focus of this study is to explore who the last-minute leavers are, how they performed at UGA, and if they eventually receive a degree from another institution.

Major findings from this study are:

- From 2002 - 2006, on average, about 100 students dropped after gaining senior status in each cohort.
- The top three majors that these last-minute leavers majored in during their last term were biology, psychology, and pre-pharm/pre-nursing.
- About 31% of the last-minute leavers left with a GPA 3.0 or higher; about 52% of these high-achieving leavers went on to receive a bachelor's or higher degree from another four-year institution.
- About 17% of the last-minute leavers left UGA with GPA below 2.0; about 4% of these low-achieving leavers obtained a degree later elsewhere.
- The top three schools that these last-minute leavers subsequently enrolled were Georgia Health Sciences University, Georgia State University, and Kennesaw State University.

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<sup>1</sup> UGA's Comparator Peer list: <http://oir.uga.edu/peer-groups/>

<sup>2</sup> UGA First-Time Full-Time persistence tracking: [https://facts.oir.uga.edu/facts/Ret\\_FTF-R.cfm](https://facts.oir.uga.edu/facts/Ret_FTF-R.cfm)

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## Study Report

Every year there are students from the senior class leaving UGA without obtaining a degree. “Who are they?” “How did they perform while in UGA?” “Where do they go after leaving UGA?” These are just a few of the questions that faculty and campus administrators may ask when discussing how to improve UGA’s graduation rate. The purpose of this brief investigation is to explore who the last-minute leavers are, how they performed at UGA, and if they eventually receive a degree from another institution.

### Term of Definition

*Last-Minute Leavers* — students who left UGA after gaining over 90 academic credit hours

*High-Achieving Leavers* — last-minute leavers whose final cumulative GPA was 3.0 or higher

*Median-Achieving Leavers* — last-minute leavers whose final cumulative GPA was between 2.0 and 2.99

*Low-Achieving Leavers* — last-minute leavers whose final cumulative GPA was below 2.0

### Research Sample and Data Sources

Five cohorts of first-time full-time freshmen from Fall 2002 to Fall 2006 were pooled to provide a sizable sample and a longitudinal perspective for this study. Students from the cohorts who didn’t receive a bachelor’s degree, nor went into first-professional programs, and are not still enrolled, are considered leavers. Leavers from the five cohorts whose last class standing were senior with more than 90 academic credit hours were combined to form the sample for this study.

The sample’s demographic characteristics and academic status were compiled from OIR’s historical student information database. Student financial aid data were obtained from UGA’s Student Financial Aid Office. National Student Clearinghouse<sup>3</sup> data for these last-minute leavers were obtained to track their subsequent enrollment and any degrees awarded at other institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> National Student Clearinghouse is a private verification provider for enrollment and degrees awarded at US higher education institutions.

**Primary Findings**

Last-Minute Leavers

From each of the five first-time full-time freshmen cohorts of Fall 2002 to Fall 2006, about 100 students fell into the last-minute leaver group, which is about 2% of the cohort. With the understanding that students dropped out with reasons varying with their academic experience at UGA, these last-minute leavers were grouped into three subgroups based on their final cumulative GPA, and analyses were performed separately. Students who left with a GPA of 3.0 or higher were classified as high-achieving leavers, which accounted for 30.8% of the total last-minute leaver group, those with a GPA between 2.0 and 2.99 were classified as median-achieving leavers and they accounted for 51.7% of the total last-minute leavers, while those with a GPA below 2.0 were classified as low-achieving leavers and they accounted for 17.4% of the total last-minute leaver group. Figure 1 below gives a visual presentation of the three subgroups.

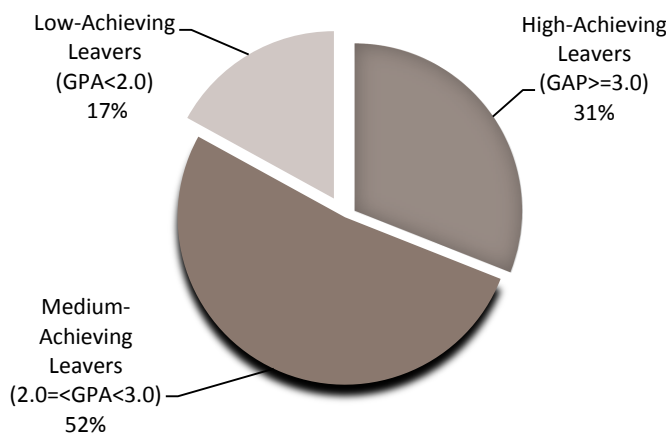


Figure 1. Classification of last-minute leavers by final UGA GPA

### Demographical Profiles

Detailed information regarding the last-minute leavers' gender and ethnic background are presented in Table 1 below. Table 1 shows that compared to the gender and ethnicity distributions in the overall first-time full-time cohorts, male students seemed to have a higher percentage as last-minute leavers (45.5%) than in the general cohort (39.2%). Also Asian students had a disproportionately higher presence (14.3% vs. 6.2%) in the group of high-achieving leavers, while black students had a disproportionately higher presence in the group of low-achieving leavers (16.8% vs. 6.1%).

Table 1. Gender and ethnicity distribution of last-minute leavers in comparison with the overall cohort

	Freshmen Cohorts	All Leavers	High-Achieving Leavers		Medium-Achieving Leavers		Low-Achieving Leavers	
	Percentage	Percentage	Head Count	Percentage	Head Count	Percentage	Head Count	Percentage
Male	39.2%	45.5%	57	23.0%	133	53.6%	58	23.4%
Female	60.85%	54.5%	111	37.4%	149	50.2%	37	12.4%
Asian	6.2%	11.0%	24	14.3%	26	9.2%	10	10.5%
Black	6.1%	9.2%	4	2.4%	30	10.6%	16	16.8%
Hispanic	2.0%	2.9%	8	4.8%	4	1.4%	4	4.2%
Am. Indian	0.2%							
Multi-Racial	2.5%	1.8%	2	1.2%	6	2.1%	2	2.1%
White	81.2%	71.6%	124	73.8%	205	72.7%	61	64.2%
Unknown	1.8%	3.5%	6	3.6%	11	3.9%	2	2.1%
Total	100%	100%	168	100%	282	100%	95	100%

### Academic Preparedness

The last-minute leavers' final GPA and their levels of academic preparedness were compared and details are presented in Table 2. Table 2 shows that upon leaving UGA, last-minute leavers' cumulative GPA were consistent with their level of academic preparedness when coming into UGA. For example, high-achieving leavers had on average a combined SAT score of 1242, a high-school GPA of 3.75, and an Academic Index<sup>4</sup> of 3.29, all higher than the overall cohort average of 1219, 3.65 and 3.19 respectively. For the low-achieving leavers, they came to UGA with an average combined SAT score of 1178, a high-school GPA of 3.38, and an Academic Index of 2.94, which were all noticeably lower than the average of their peers in the same cohorts.

Table 2. Academic preparedness of last-minute leavers

	Final UGA GPA	High School GPA	Academic Index	ACT Composite	SAT Verbal	SAT Math
Freshmen Cohorts	3.34	3.65	3.19	26	606	613
High-Achieving Leavers	3.40	3.75	3.29	25	616	626
Medium-Achieving Leavers	2.50	3.50	3.04	26	600	600
Low-Achieving Leavers	1.83	3.38	2.94	24	582	596

<sup>4</sup> Academic Index is a constructed GPA by the Admissions office using SAT/ACT, high school GPA, and high school curriculum rigor.

### Final Status at UGA

The number of terms enrolled, credit hours earned, last major, and last term financial aid information for the last-minute leavers were compiled in order to gain some understanding of their status upon leaving UGA. Data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that on average, the high-achieving leavers actively enrolled for 8 terms (summer included) at UGA and earned an average of 106 credit hours before their departure; the medium-achieving leavers enrolled for 10 terms and earned an average of 112 credit hours, and the low-achieving leavers, 11 terms and 106 credit hours. It is also worth mentioning that low-achieving leavers on average enrolled 3 more terms to earn the same amount of credit hours as high-achieving leavers.

Table 3. Average terms enrolled and credit hours earned by last-minute leavers

	Terms	Credit Hours
High-Achieving Leavers	8	106
Medium-Achieving Leavers	10	112
Low-Achieving Leavers	11	106

The top five ending majors of last-minute leavers are presented in Table 4. The percentage of last-minute leavers majored in biology was 8.3%, 6.6% majored in psychology, 5.5% in pre-pharmacy/pre-nursing, 4.6% in speech communication, and 3.9% respectively in English and history.

Table 4. Top five ending majors of last-minute leavers

Top Five Majors	Head Count	Percentage
Biology	45	8.3%
Psychology	36	6.6%
Pre-Pharmacy/Pre-Nursing	30	5.5%
Speech Communication	25	4.6%
English	21	3.9%
History	21	3.9%
Other Majors	367	67.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>545</b>	<b>100%</b>

Further examinations of last-minute leaver's major by academic achievement level revealed that the leavers tend to cluster in certain disciplines based on their levels of academic achievement. Detailed information regarding students' ending major and their academic achievement levels are presented in Table 5. According to Table 5, the top two majors for the high-achieving leavers were Pre-Pharmacy/Nursing (n=27) and Biology (n=19); the top two majors for the medium-achieving leavers were Speech Communication (n=21) and Biology (n=21). For the low-achieving group, the top two majors were International Affairs (n=9) and History (n=8). It is also worth noticing that 90% of leavers from pre-pharmacy/pre-nursing were high-achieving leavers (27 out of 30, Table 4), while biology also had a large proportion of high-achieving leavers (42.2%, 19 out of 45, Table 4) and medium-achieving leavers (46.7%, 21 out of 45, Table 4).

Table 5. Top ending majors of last-minute leavers by achievement levels

High-Achieving Leavers		Medium-Achieving Leavers		Low-Achieving Leavers	
Major	Head Count	Major	Head Count	Major	Head Count
Pre-Pharmacy/Nursing	27	Speech Communication	21	International Affairs	9
Biology	19	Biology	21	History	8
Psychology	11	Psychology	19	Computer Science	7
Kinesiology	8	English	16	Psychology	6
Human Dev. & Family Science	5	Sociology	14	Biology	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>168</b>		<b>282</b>		<b>95</b>

### Subsequent Degree Attainment after UGA

After leaving UGA, some of the last-minute leavers pursued study and received degrees in other institutions. Their subsequent degree information was obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse and presented in Table 6. As seen in Table 6, of the 545 last-minute leavers, 23.5% (n=128) received bachelor's or higher degrees and 1.8% (n=10) received certificates or associate degrees from institutions other than UGA. Of the high-achieving leavers' group, 52.4% (88 out of 168) went on to receive a bachelor's or higher degree while the percentages were 12.8% (36 out of 282) and 4.2% (4 out of 95) for medium-achieving and low-achieving leavers respectively.

Table 6. Subsequent degrees of last-minute leavers by achievement levels

Subsequent Degree	High-Achieving Leavers	Medium-Achieving Leavers	Low-Achieving Leavers	Total
Last-Minute Leavers	168	282	95	545
Certificate/Associate Degree Recipients	1	6	3	10
Bachelor's /Higher Degree Recipients	88	36	4	128

Data Sources: UGA OIR Data Repository & National Student Clearinghouse

The top ten most popular institutions where these last-minute leavers went to and received degrees are presented in Table 7 below. The listing is ranked by the number of degrees awarded to UGA's last-minute leavers. Georgia Health Sciences University seems to be the top destination for high-achieving leavers in particular. Georgia State University, Kennesaw State University, Georgia Tech, and Mercer University also topped the list. In the "Other Universities" category in Table 7 are 36 other institutions that each had fewer than 3 degrees awarded to these last-minute leavers.

Table 7. Top institutions by numbers of degrees awarded to UGA's last-minute leavers

Top Ten Institutions	High-Achieving Leavers	Medium-Achieving Leavers	Low-Achieving Leavers	Total
Georgia Health Sciences University	35	2	0	37
Georgia State University	5	6	0	11
Kennesaw State University	3	5	1	9
Georgia Institute of Technology	4	2	0	6
Mercer University	7	0	0	7
Emory University	3	1	0	4
Medical Univ. of South Carolina	3	1	0	4
Samford University	4	0	0	4
Armstrong Atlantic State University	2	1	0	3
Savannah College of Art & Design	3	0	0	3
Other Universities	19	18	3	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>128</b>

Data Sources: UGA OIR Data Repository & National Student Clearinghouse



The last-minute leavers pursued degrees in various academic fields after leaving UGA. The bachelor's degrees awarded from other institutions are listed in Table 8 by academic fields. Table 8 showed that the degrees obtained by UGA's last-minute leavers were mainly in health sciences areas (46.1%) including pharmacy, nursing, dentistry, etc., but also in biological sciences (5.5%), arts (5.5%) such as film, theater, interior design, etc., and other STEM and social science fields.

Table 8. Area of Bachelor Degrees awarded to last minute leavers from other institutions

Area of Degree	Head Count	Percentage
Health Science	59	46.1%
Biological Science	7	5.5%
Arts	7	5.5%
Business/Management	4	3.1%
Engineering	4	3.1%
Education	3	2.3%
Political Science	2	1.6%
Mathematics	2	1.6%
Advertising	1	.8%
Physics	1	.8%
Psychology	1	.8%
Other Social Science	9	7.1%
Degree Unspecified <sup>5</sup>	28	21.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>100%</b>

Data Sources: UGA OIR Data Repository & National Student Clearinghouse

<sup>5</sup> Due to the incompleteness of the National Student Clearinghouse data, details of degree names of some degrees awarded were not available.

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## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, UGA lost about 100 senior students from its fall freshmen cohorts from 2002 to 2006. Of these last-minute leavers, about 31% left UGA with a GPA 3.0 or above, and more than half of these high-achieving leavers continued and obtained bachelor's or higher degrees from other institutions. Most of the high-achieving leavers pursued professional study in health sciences or related fields, and Georgia Health Sciences University topped the list in attracting these students.

About 52% of the leavers had earned a GPA between 2.0 and 3.0 upon leaving UGA and nearly 13% of them eventually obtained a degree outside UGA. Georgia State University and Kennesaw State University tend to be those students' subsequent choices after UGA.

Leavers with a cumulative GPA below 2.0 accounted for about 17% of the last-minute leavers. They had noticeably weaker academic readiness in comparison with their peers when coming into UGA, and 4% of them eventually obtained some kind of credential from an institution other than UGA.

About 23% of UGA's last-minute leavers eventually achieved their college goals. For some of those leavers, UGA might have served as their "transitional" institution since they eventually obtained a degree that UGA does not offer, especially in health-science related fields. About 77% of the last-minute leavers did not obtain a college degree after leaving UGA with more than 90 credit hours earned.

In conclusion, if effective strategies can be developed to help these last-minute leaver students successfully graduate from UGA, there potentially could be a 2% increase in UGA's graduation rate.

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