FINDINGS FROM THE NEW TRI-C STUDENT WITHDRAWAL SURVEY

What the results suggest about course experiences, student constraints, and timely support

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Scope and approach

These insights draw on two versions of the Student Course Withdrawal Survey. The newer instrument has roughly 300 responses so far and should be treated as an early but consistent signal about emerging patterns, not as a definitive ranking of causes. The older instrument, with more than 10,000 responses, offers a stable view of broad patterns at scale but with less nuance about what sits beneath labels like “academic difficulty” or “dissatisfaction.”

The survey was redesigned because earlier results hinted at three recurring problems: misalignment between students and their course content, misalignment between students and the course format, and delays in feedback. The older instrument, however, could not make those patterns clearly visible. The new design introduces items that separate learning fit, format fit, and expectation clarity so that emerging patterns can be tied more directly to conditions within the course and to the timing of support.

Both surveys were online instruments sent to students having withdrawn from one or more courses including those completely withdrawing for the semester. The surveys excluded students who elected to “drop” their course(s) during the add/drop window. This analysis also draws on the themes that emerge from students’ open-ended responses. Those narrative comments help clarify how broad categories such as health strain, learning fit, and course clarity actually play out in day-to-day course life.

What students reveal in the new survey

The summaries below present the main response patterns that emerged from the survey. They do not represent wholly separate explanations for withdrawal, since students’ circumstances often overlap, but they do capture the most common forms of difficulty respondents described. Some reflect pressures outside the classroom, especially health, work, and family responsibilities. Others reflect features of the academic experience itself, including instructional fit, course clarity, and format mismatch. Taken together, these responses point toward a working hypothesis rather than a settled conclusion: withdrawal often reflects accumulating pressures that may be intensified when expectations are unclear, course format or instructional approach feel misaligned, and feedback arrives after confusion has had time to grow.

These preliminary results sharpen and reinforce the earlier analysis. The survey does not show students withdrawing for a wide scattering of unrelated reasons. It shows a concentration around a limited number of recurring pressures that often interact and build on one another.

1. Health and personal strain as the leading pressure

Mental or physical health concerns emerge as the most frequently selected reason in this early sample. Student comments often describe being overwhelmed, managing serious or chronic conditions, or dealing with acute health events that leave little room for recovery. In these circumstances, withdrawal becomes a form of immediate relief when students feel they can no longer carry additional strain.

2. Learning fit and course experience as a close second

The second most common reason, reported by just over 30 percent of students, is that the course content or instructional approach did not fit their learning needs. Students are not simply saying the course was difficult. Many are describing uncertainty about how to succeed in that specific environment. Their comments point to unclear priorities, slow or opaque grading, and a sense that they were largely teaching themselves without timely guidance.

3. Work, time, and schedule friction

Job or work schedule conflicts also appear prominently, cited by roughly one quarter of respondents. Another sizable group reports that course meeting times or schedules did not fit with other responsibilities. Many students are balancing employment, caregiving, and multiple courses, so when time becomes unstable the course is often the part of life they can change. Withdrawal may be the only way to preserve work, family obligations, or progress in another demanding class.

4. Course clarity, format fit, and navigability

About one in five students report that course expectations were unclear or confusing, and a similar share say the course format was not a good fit. In their comments, students describe disorganized course shells, outdated syllabi, shifting or unclear due dates, and heavy reliance on self-instruction in courses listed as in-person. These responses suggest that confusion and format mismatch are recurring conditions that make it harder for students to stay oriented and keep pace.

5. Family responsibilities and secondary barriers

Family and childcare responsibilities remain a meaningful source of difficulty. Smaller but still important shares of students also cite limited tutoring support, difficulty accessing technology or materials, transportation problems, and financial strain. Individually, these factors appear less often than health, work, or learning fit. In practice, however, they often intensify those larger pressures. When time, money, and health are already under stress, even modest barriers in childcare, transportation, or technology can push early difficulty toward withdrawal.

How the older survey findings align and what the new data clarifies

The older survey tells the same broad story, but through a more blunt set of categories. Academic difficulty, personal or family reasons, dissatisfaction with instruction, and work-related conflicts sit near the top. Taken at face value, those results could be read as a list of individual challenges. Looked at more closely, they point to learning fit issues, course navigability problems, and time scarcity that the instrument could not fully separate.

The redesigned survey does not overturn that picture; rather it appears to sharpen it. The new items suggest that learning fit, course clarity, and format fit are not minor or residual concerns, but seem to sit near the top of the list alongside health and work in how students describe their experiences. The effect is to move from “students struggle academically” to a more actionable signal about which aspects of the learning experience matter most when time and bandwidth are limited.

Read together, the two surveys offer a consistent pattern. Health and personal strain, work and schedule conflicts, and learning experience problems are the core drivers. The older survey shows their prevalence at scale. The newer survey clarifies the mechanisms inside the learning experience that make withdrawal more likely when those external pressures are present.

What the surveys imply about the withdrawal decision

Across both instruments and the open responses, withdrawal appears less like a single breaking point and more like an accumulation problem. Students describe a consistent sequence: life strain rises, confusion or misalignment in the course persists, workload feels unrecoverable, and the arithmetic of catching up no longer makes sense. At that point, stepping away looks less like impulsive quitting and more like a rational decision to avoid failing, protect GPA, preserve income, or stabilize family obligations.

Several recurring patterns stand out:

- Early confusion about expectations, pacing, or grading criteria lingers long enough to become costly.
- Course structures and communication norms sometimes assume a level of time flexibility that many students do not have.
- When a health event, job change, or family disruption occurs, students often face rigid deadlines and limited recovery options.

Seen from this perspective, the surveys are not simply cataloguing reasons. They are describing a system in which normal learning difficulty, combined with tight time, money, and health margins, can quickly tip from effortful persistence into disengagement when feedback and recovery options are too slow or too limited. That dynamic raises an immediate question about the institution's most visible response mechanism.

A note on Early Alert systems

Early Alert systems are one of the most visible ways colleges signal that they take early signs of struggle seriously. They are generally well-intentioned, designed to give faculty a channel to express concern, to give advisors a way to prioritize outreach, and to give the institution a clearer view of emerging risk.

Preliminary evidence at Tri-C suggests, however, that alerts tend to activate relatively late in the term, especially in the context of 14- or 16-week courses. On average, most students do not receive Early Alert feedback until roughly the fourth to seventh week of a 14- or 16-week course. That pattern appears broadly typical of community colleges and universities that rely on similar alert designs. By that point, confusion has often accumulated, deadlines have passed, and the realistic window for recovery has narrowed. In those cases, the alert confirms that trouble exists but arrives too late to make a meaningful adjustment in pacing, expectations, or workload.

This timing gap means Early Alert often functions more as a diagnostic tool than as a mechanism that reliably changes trajectories. The system becomes better at documenting distress than at altering the conditions that produced it. Students may receive outreach, encouragement, or referrals, but deadlines, course structures, and grading rhythms frequently remain unchanged, so the arithmetic of catching up still does not work in their favor.

There is also a relational cost that many institutions have to manage. In typical Early Alert designs, a student is contacted by someone they have never met, informed that concern has been raised about their performance, and encouraged to seek learning support. For some students, that outreach is welcome and helpful; for others, especially when messages are impersonal or framed in deficit terms, it can feel awkward or even stigmatizing, which makes it easier to ignore even when the underlying need is real.

None of this argues against Early Alert as such. It argues for understanding its limits and repositioning it within a broader feedback design. To be genuinely early, alerts would need to trigger on the wobble that instructors already see in day-to-day work, and they would need to be coupled to course-proximal options that can shift expectations, clarify confusion, or adjust pacing while there is still time for those changes to matter.

Interpretation: Why learning fit and course design point to shorter feedback loops

Recent scholarship on student withdrawal, learning fit, and early feedback systems provides a useful foundation for interpreting the Tri-C survey results. That body of work consistently finds that learning fit, course navigability, and the timing of feedback shape whether students remain engaged when difficulty begins to emerge. These conditions are not merely background features of the student experience. They influence whether early academic strain remains manageable or gradually becomes harder to recover from.

In this literature, problems of learning fit often appear first in the texture of everyday course participation rather than only in final outcomes. They take the form of partial understanding on early assignments, missed or late low-stakes work, uncertainty about what matters most in the course, or quiet disengagement while students are still technically attending. Students discover missing assignments only after deadlines have passed, or come to understand major expectations too late for meaningful adjustment.

These patterns suggest that the timing of feedback and clarification matters as much as the feedback itself. When signals about performance, expectations, or academic risk arrive late in the term, or when they depend on systems that feel separate from the course experience, the practical opportunity for recovery has often already narrowed. By that point, students are reassessing whether catching up is realistic under the conditions they are managing.

Viewed through that research lens, shorter feedback loops at the course level appear especially relevant. The scholarship points to several practices in particular:

- Early, low stakes checks for understanding in the first weeks that make confusion visible before it accumulates
- Clear and timely confirmation that students understand course expectations, grading practices, and what steady progress looks like, especially when they are balancing work and family responsibilities
- Simple and achievable recovery pathways after early difficulty, such as short catch-up plans, assignment specific tutoring, or feasible movement to a different section or format when a mismatch becomes clear

The new survey frequencies give this interpretation added weight. When about four in ten withdrawing students cite health concerns, about one third cite learning fit, roughly one quarter cite work conflicts, and about one in five cite unclear expectations or format mismatch, course level design and timing appear closely connected to the withdrawal decision. That does not mean they are the only factors involved, but it does suggest they deserve careful attention as part of how the College interprets student withdrawal and considers its implications.

Implications for Institutional Attention

In the context of the College's broader goals for student momentum and economic mobility, these findings point beyond encouragement to persist and toward the conditions under which students are able to experience progress as visible, manageable, and worth sustaining under pressure. Three areas deserve particular attention:

- Learning fit, course clarity, and format alignment appear to matter more than withdrawal discussions sometimes assume, especially in courses where students

report confusion, weak instructional connection, or a sense that they are largely teaching themselves.

- The timing and visibility of academic signals may be especially important. Student comments suggest that grading rhythms, feedback, and other early indicators of difficulty can shape whether students are able to adjust while meaningful options still remain available.
- Work demands, caregiving responsibilities, and health challenges are not peripheral circumstances in these responses. They appear as central features of the conditions under which many students are trying to learn, which suggests the importance of interpreting course experiences in relation to the broader constraints students are managing.

The surveys do not evaluate any specific program, policy, or process directly, but they do provide a coherent signal about where students encounter fragility in their experience. Perhaps most importantly, many respondents still indicate a willingness to re-enroll and continue investing in their education. That finding reframes the stakes: withdrawal, for many of these students, reflects strain overtaking momentum under current conditions, not a final decision to disengage from college altogether. The students have not given up. The question is whether institutional conditions can be adjusted before they do.

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