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# Identifying and Removing Barriers Influencing New Students' Decision to enroll in an online course

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## Abstract

Why are newly admitted students to online programs not registering in courses in the session for which they applied for admission. Two surveys were completed (January 2019 and May 2019) by students who had accepted an offer of admission into an online program at Laurentian University, but had subsequently not registered for courses for the academic session for which the admission application had been made. The surveys' aim was to determine which factors prevented students from enrolling into courses. Findings from the surveys indicate that while financial factors are most often cited (as is reflected in the current research literature), steps can be taken by the institution to mitigate this particular factor and support students in their decision to enroll in courses. This article presents an overview of the identified barriers (financial support and lack of proper academic advising) and discusses some of the strategies, which Laurentian University has since undertaken to help remove or lessen these barriers.

## Introduction

Laurentian University, located in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, offers 24 degree programs (23 undergraduate and 1 graduate) as well as over 500 courses that are either completely online or blended (online with print-based components). Online distance education courses increase student access, promote professional development, increase student diversity, and are attractive to students (Canadian Digital Learning Research Association, 2018). Additionally, 1 in 5 post-secondary students took an online course in 2017-2018 (eCampus Ontario, 2018). Given this data, why are students accepting offers of admission from Laurentian University for various online degree programs but not taking the next step and registering into an online course? This paper reports on results gathered from two surveys: one conducted in January 2019 (for Winter 2019 applicants) and one conducted in July 2019 (for Spring 2019 applicants) and how the university responded to the survey findings to remove some of the identified barriers. The surveys were sent to non-enrolled applicants who had accepted an offer of admission into an online program from Laurentian University, but had subsequently not registered in any courses.

## Literature Review

Tinto (2006) states that “[s]tudent retention is one of the most widely studied areas in higher education” (p. 1). While there are several frameworks (Rovai, 2003; Swail, 2004) which describe the various factors influencing student retention, they all appear to advocate for face-to-face interaction with newly admitted students to convert them into enrolled students who have paid their tuition and registered in courses. Most of the student profiles discussed in this retention literature are students who have just completed high school, who are still living with parents and whose financial situation and cultural background are reflective of that of their immediate family.

By contrast, research with online students suggests that students studying either completely at a distance or online are non-traditional students. This means that they are over the age of 25 years, may either have prior post-secondary education or have not completed high school at all, may have work experience or be currently employed either on a part-time or full-time basis and may have family responsibilities (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The retention literature has also concluded that there is no one factor that explains why students do not pursue their studies either in a face-to-face setting (Tinto, 2006), or online (Berge & Huang, 2004). Instead, it identifies a set of variables in the personal, institutional and circumstantial realm that can affect a student's persistence in post-secondary online studies (Berge & Huang, 2004) and explains how different combinations of these variables can explain a student's decision to persist or drop out.

Furthermore, research focusing on factors leading to attrition and creation of retention strategies in online programs have mostly focused on students who had registered in online degree programs and courses, and subsequently withdrawn from their online studies (Gilbert, 2000; Kember, 1989; Tyler-Smith, 2006). The research findings of our article will help fill a void in the research literature as it discusses research conducted with newly admitted but not yet enrolled applicants to online degree programs, and provides examples on how these findings can be used to improve institutional variables to reverse student attrition and support student persistence.

## Research Design and Method

A mixed-method written bilingual survey consisting of closed and open-ended questions was developed to determine why students are accepting an offer of admission from Laurentian University for various online degree programs but not taking the next step and registering into an online course. The survey consisted of three sections (see Appendix), including a short introduction explaining the purpose of the survey. The survey option with both closed and open-ended questions was selected to collect data as it was deemed the quickest and most efficient way to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, which could be quickly summarized and analyzed to help inform student support priorities for the upcoming academic session.

The first section (Questions 1 -3) consisted of three demographic questions. In the second section, (Question 4), students were asked to choose from a list of eleven barriers that may have resulted in their decision not to register for courses. They could select as many barriers as were applicable to their personal situation. These barriers were previously identified in other internal surveys and exit interviews. Furthermore, some of the barriers identified were based on eCampus Ontario's (2017) *Drivers and Barriers to Online Learning in Ontario*. Given that, there could be numerous barriers to pursuing an online education, this list of barriers included a text box allowing students to specify any other issues or barriers they may have encountered that negatively influenced their decision to register for courses and begin their studies.

The next question (Question 5) asked for the student's perspective on what could help influence their decision to begin to pursue their studies through the Laurentian Online department. The last section (Question 6) asked students to enter their contact information as well as a program of study (added in the second iteration of the survey) should they wish to be contacted by Laurentian University's academic advising team to discuss enrolling during the following semester.

The bilingual survey was created with Google Forms, administered using our internal emailing system, and locked to one response per email address. Applicants consent to receiving communications from Laurentian University via institutional email when they accept an offer of admission, therefore the survey was sent to all applicants who had accepted an offer of admission but did not register for a course during the two chosen terms for this study. Convenience sampling was used to create our mail out list, based on the non-enrolled applicant data received from the Students Records Office. The non-enrolled applicants received the survey invite with the link to the survey and were given one week to respond to the survey before the results were analyzed.

The first survey was sent via email in January 2019 to those applicants who had accepted an offer of admission from Laurentian University to begin their studies either part-time or full-time online during the Winter 2019 term, but had not registered for any courses. The survey was repeated in July 2019, with those non-enrolled students who had accepted an offer of admission for the Spring 2019 semester but once again, had not registered for any courses. The same bilingual three-section survey created using Google Forms was used for the second survey; however, a question asking about employment status (Question 3) was added to the second iteration of the survey. Furthermore, the last section (Question 6) asking students if they consented to be contacted by an academic advisor if they were interested in pursuing their studies, was changed to include a text box for intended program of study along with asking for the name and phone number of the respondent. This added information made it easier for the academic advisor to prepare for their follow-up contact with the non-enrolled applicant. In order to review the results of this survey and draw conclusions, the responses for each question were converted into percentages.

**Results**

The January 2019 survey was sent to 329 students who had accepted an offer of admission into full-time and part-time online programs but never registered for courses during the Winter term, while the July 2019 survey was sent to 79 students who had accepted an offer of admission but had not registered for any courses during the Spring 2019 semester.

The survey remained open for one week. Results were received within 72 hours for the Winter 2019 survey and within 36 hours for the Spring 2019 survey. The first survey had a response rate of 23.1% while the second survey had a response rate of 30.4%.

Demographic data gathered from Question 1 in the first survey showed that 33% of the respondents were male and 62% female and 5% prefer not to answer. In the second survey, 11% were male and 89% were female. Overall, the majority of our respondents over the two surveys were female. Figure 1 provides an overview of the gender distribution of respondents:

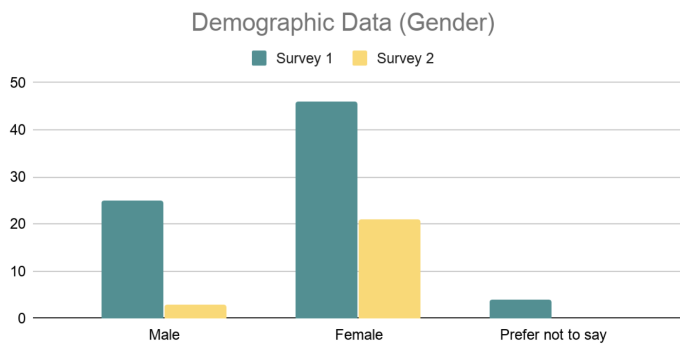


Figure 1. Gender distribution. This figure shows the gender distribution of the survey respondents.

Demographic data gathered from Question 2 showed that the average age of the respondents was between 36 - 40 years for both surveys. Figure 2 provides an overview of the age distribution of survey respondents:

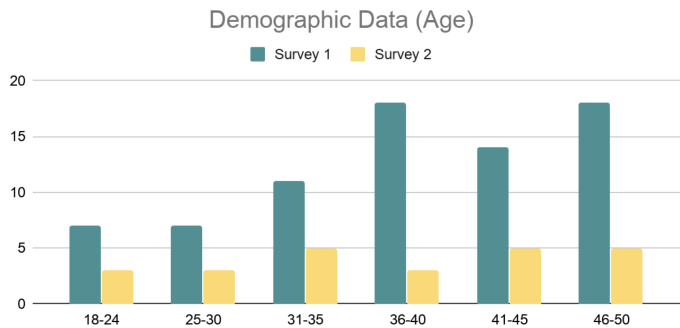


Figure 2. Age distribution. This figure shows the age distribution of the survey respondents.

We added Question 3 about current employment status to the July 2019 version of the survey, as we wanted to see how many of our prospective students are already working full-time while wanting to pursue online studies. This question was added after it was identified that financial barriers and job obligations were two of the biggest barriers during the first survey.

Question 4 in the survey asked students “Why did you not register for courses?” after indicating their intention to pursue their studies part-time or full-time online and at distance at Laurentian University during the 2018-2019 academic year. Figure 3 provides a summary of the responses received from both surveys and from both the English and French version of the survey:

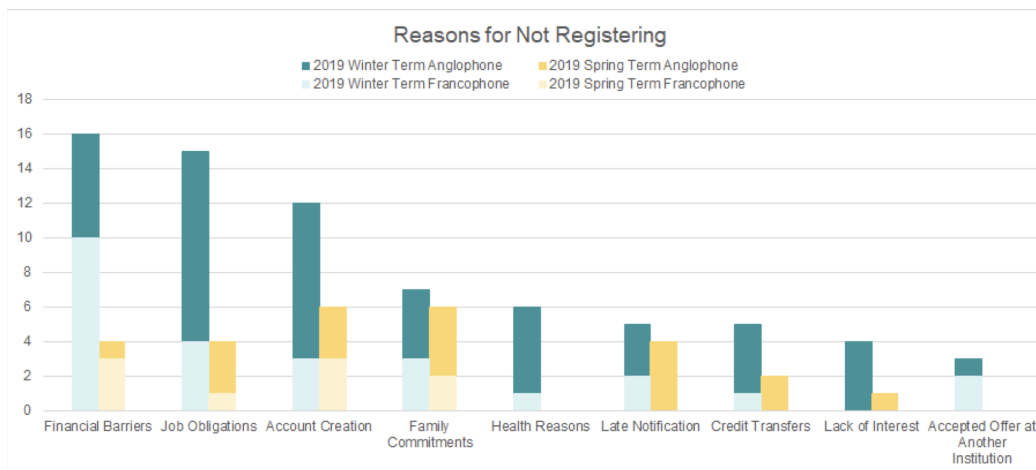


Figure 3. Why did you not register for courses? This figure presents a summary of the responses to Question 4.

The responses indicate that the most common reason for both Anglophone and Francophone students to not pursue their registration for courses during the Winter 2019 term were financial barriers. This barrier was followed by job obligations preventing them from beginning their studies. Institutional barriers such as student account creation issues were the third most common reason cited among the students who did not register for a course during the Winter 2019 term, followed by family commitments. The Spring 2019 survey results identified the following barriers: late notification of the offer of admission by the institution was followed by family commitments, and thirdly, account creation issues. Financial barriers dropped to third place (for possible reasons outlined in the Discussion section of this paper) followed by job obligations preventing non-enrolled applicants from registering into courses.

Question 5 in the survey asked non-enrolled applicants to indicate what would have influenced them to pursue their studies at Laurentian University and Figure 4 presents an overview of the responses from both surveys and both sets of respondents:

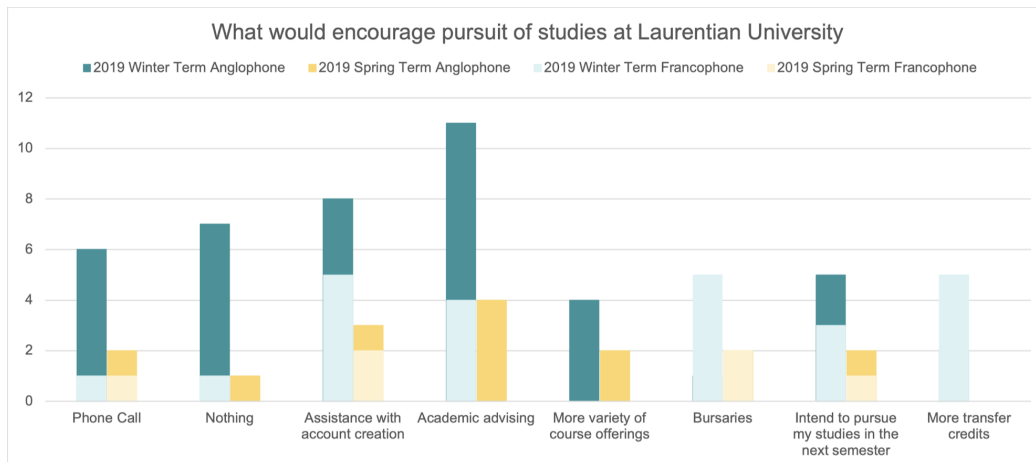


Figure 4. What would help you decide to pursue your studies at Laurentian University in the future? This figure presents a summary of the responses to Question 5.

The responses received indicated that non-enrolled applicants during the Winter 2019 session felt that it was primarily institutional barriers which dissuaded them from enrolling. The most common barrier cited was the belief that the academic advising support was not sufficient. One respondent stated 'Some help with which courses, etc. to take, how my lived experiences will help with certain courses' would have helped. This was followed by requiring more assistance with account creation during the onboarding process. Third, many respondents indicated that there was nothing Laurentian University could have done to support them in beginning their studies during the next term. Surprisingly, respondents declared that a simple phone call would have been enough to support them in beginning their academic journey. Several respondents also indicated their intention to pursue their studies during the upcoming semester. Interestingly, the francophone population decided not to pursue their studies due to a lack of transfer credits. Much like the Winter 2019 survey, students responding to the Spring 2019 survey revealed that the support they received in regards to academic advising was not sufficient. The lack of support with their account creation continued to remain an ongoing issue. Students during the Spring 2019 survey were disappointed with the variety of courses being offered and the lack of bursaries available to online learners. On a positive note, despite these challenges, some respondents did indicate their intention to pursue their post-secondary online studies in the following semester.

## Discussion

Data analysis of the Winter 2019 survey was completed in February 2019 and as indicated above, financial barriers were identified as one of the main reasons that led non-enrolled applicants to not pursue their studies and taking the next step by registering in courses. In response to this finding, meetings were held between the Laurentian Online Department unit in the Centre for Academic Excellence, and the Student Fees and the Student Awards Office to determine how to minimize the perceived financial barriers. Currently, few scholarships are available to online learners outside of Ontario. However, the Laurentian Online Department and the Student Fees and Student Awards Office were able to collaborate and create an additional resource sheet, shared via email, to encourage students to explore their provincial full-time or part-time student load and grant programs. In addition, links to the website of each provincial financial assistance program was provided in the resource sheet. The barriers were similar for both linguistic groups of students; however, transfer credits were a unique barrier to the francophone student population during the Winter 2019 survey. This barrier was specific to where in Canada the applicants were coming from, and for the program that they were applying.

After analyzing the results, further meetings were held with various departments regarding the barriers that were identified, such as the Office of Admissions, and the Office of Information Technology. For the Winter 2019 Survey, an email campaign was created for all fully online learners. Within the email campaign, potential students and current students were provided with the links for financial aid resources for each province.

The Spring 2019 survey indicated that the financial barrier was not the biggest barrier. Instead, account creation issues were cited as the number one barrier. The goal before the administration of the next survey is to determine what the main issues with the account creations are and how they could be mitigated for the non-enrolled applicants. While some of the barriers such as job obligations are not something that can be modified, this barrier should be taken into consideration when on-boarding new students to ensure that they are aware of institutional supports which are available to help them fulfill both their job obligations and their course requirements.

An academic advisor contacted those students, who had consented to be contacted to begin their studies in the following semester. 25% of the non-enrolled applicants from Winter 2019 were contacted by an academic advisor and enrolled in a course the Spring 2019 term. We were able to determine that we retained at least 7 students due to the follow-up provided by the academic advisors.

### Limitations

Several limitations have been identified. The data analysis for this study did not include any correlations to determine chief barriers by age, gender or employment status. Compounding the lack of correlation of data is the fact that we added questions to the second version of the survey, which were not in the initial survey, hence increasing the data sets from one survey to the next.

Another limitation is the small response rate, which makes us unable to generalize our conclusions to the general population. However, the identification of barriers previously identified from both previous internal surveys and the research literature does replicate similar findings for other populations and strengthens the external validity of this study.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, this study set out to determine why 329 and 79 prospective students applied for admission and accepted an offer of admission to an online program at Laurentian University during the Winter 2019 and Spring 2019 semesters respectively, but failed to pursue actual course registration. The results of the survey have given the Laurentian Online Department staff the necessary data to implement procedural changes to minimize some of the perceived institutional barriers for the non-enrolled applicants. After analyzing the survey results, meetings were held with various departments regarding the barriers that had been identified. For example, after the results of the Winter 2019 Survey indicated that financial considerations was the main barrier, an email campaign was created in partnership with the Student Awards Office to provide applicants and already registered students with links for financial aid resources for each province. This initiative reduced the perception of this particular barrier and produced results in the subsequent Spring 2019 survey showing that financial barriers are no longer the main barrier for that cohort of non-enrolled applicants.

This survey will be administered each semester as it has proven to also have an impact on student retention as evidenced by 63.33% of those non-enrolled applicants who provided contact information for follow-up enrolling in a course in the subsequent academic session.

The survey findings have enabled us to review and evaluate the effectiveness of institutional processes continuously, especially as they pertain to online study and to respond immediately. The findings also confirm the assumption that work still needs to be done to support our students once they have accepted their offer of admission. Conversations are ongoing with the Transitions and Engagement team in order to determine how we can: a) improve our communication to our students; b) provide more opportunities for orientation to online studies and university administrative processes; and c) provide greater clarity regarding student account creation.

While the steps taken after the data analysis are specific to our institution, we believe that other institutions who undertake this type of survey would benefit from undergoing such an exercise. It is our belief that institutions would be able to apply their findings to their own institutional processes and would thus be working to enhance the “institutional action” (p. 6) as outlined by Tinto (2006). While the retention literature as a whole discusses persistence of students once enrolled in courses, our paper adds the perspective of creating retention strategies geared to fully online students who decide to withdraw from the university before their first course registration.

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## Appendix

### Survey (English)

We noticed that you had accepted an offer of admission to Laurentian University, but did not register for any classes. We would like to find out why. We have prepared a short, 6-question survey, which should only take a few moments to complete. Thank you for your feedback.

1. What gender do you identify as?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other : \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your age?

- 18 - 24 years old
- 25 - 30 years old
- 31 - 35 years old
- 36 - 40 years old
- 41 - 45 years old
- 46 - 50 years old
- 51 - 55 years old
- 56 - 60 years old
- 61 - 65 years old
- Prefer not to say

3. What is your current employment status?

- Employed Full - Time
- Employed Part - Time
- Retired
- Unemployed
- Prefer not to say

4. Why did you not register for courses? Please select all that apply.

- Financial barriers
- Family commitments
- Job obligations
- Lack of interest
- I did not know that I had been admitted
- Difficulty with creating accounts
- Textbook access issues
- I was notified too late
- I accepted an offer from another institution
- I was expecting more transfer credits
- Other : \_\_\_\_\_

5. What would help you decide to pursue your studies at Laurentian University in the future?

6. If you would like us to contact you regarding reactivating your admission, provide your contact information. (Please leave blank if you do not wish to be contacted).

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### Survey (French)

Nous avons remarqué que vous avez accepté l'offre d'admission de l'université Laurentienne mais que vous ne vous êtes pas inscrit(e) à des cours. Nous aimerions en connaître la raison.

Nous avons préparé un court sondage à six questions qui ne vous prendra que quelques minutes. Nous vous remercions d'avance de le remplir.

1. À quel genre vous identifiez-vous?

- Femme
- Homme
- Je ne souhaite pas le préciser
- Autre : \_\_\_\_\_

2. Quel âge avez-vous?

- 18 à 24 ans
- 25 à 30 ans
- 31 à 35 ans
- 36 à 40 ans
- 41 à 45 ans
- 46 à 50 ans
- 51 à 55 ans
- 56 à 60 ans
- 61 à 65 ans
- 65+ ans
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

3. Quelle est votre situation d'emploi actuelle?

- Employé à temps complet
- Employé à temps partiel
- Retraité
- Sans emploi
- Je préfère ne pas répondre

4. Pourquoi ne vous êtes-vous inscrit(e) pas à des cours? Sélectionnez toutes les réponses pertinentes.

- Obstacles financiers
- Raisons de santé
- Engagements familiaux
- Obligations professionnelles
- Manque d'intérêt
- Je ne savais pas que j'avais été admis(e)
- Difficulté à créer les comptes
- Problèmes d'accès aux manuels
- J'ai été averti(e) trop tard
- J'ai accepté l'offre d'un autre établissement
- Je m'attendais à avoir plus de transferts de crédits
- Autre : \_\_\_\_\_

5. Qu'est-ce qui vous aiderait à décider d'effectuer vos études à l'université Laurentienne à l'avenir?

6. Si vous désirez que nous communiquions avec vous pour réactiver votre admission, veuillez fournir vos coordonnées. (Si vous ne désirez pas que nous communiquions avec vous, veuillez laisser cette partie vierge)