

San Francisco State University

Fall 2017 First-Time Freshmen: Students who Left Study



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A Collaboration

The Fall 2017 Students who Left Study was a collaborative effort conducted by San Francisco State University's First-Year Experience team, the Office of Institutional Research, and the Office of Developmental Studies & Retention Specialists. The basis of the study was grounded in literature (see References, pg. 22), analyzed using a mixed methods approach (i.e., qualitative & quantitative methodology), and the data were used to support an applied intervention. The Students who Left Study will help to inform next steps for the First-Year Experience team.

Dr. Grace Yoo

FYE Faculty Director
gracey@sfsu.edu

Chris Trudell

FYE Manager
trudell@sfsu.edu

Vanna Nauk

FYE Student Assistant
vnauk@mail.sfsu.edu

Emily Shindledecker

Senior Institutional
Research Analyst
eshindle@sfsu.edu

Andrew Brosnan

Director of Developmental Studies
& Retention Specialists
abrosnan@sfsu.edu

Daniza Acenas

Transition Mentor

Ameer Razman Chin

Transition Mentor

Jonathan Hooker

Transition Mentor

Rayan Madjidi

Transition Mentor

Executive Summary

Over the last decade, San Francisco State University has typically experienced 1-in-5 first-year students leaving San Francisco State University within their first-year (<https://ir.sfsu.edu/content/student-outcome>). The purpose of this study was to reach out to fall 2017 first-time students and uncover why they left SF State within their first-year. A total of 939 fall 2017 first-year students who did not return at the start of their second year were invited to complete a telephone survey. Those students who we could not reach via phone were sent an email survey. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized for this survey. Once the survey data were cleaned, we obtained a total of 285 valid responses- a 30.4% response rate. Reaching the 30% survey response rate threshold, we are more confidently able to generalize the results of this survey to the overall first-year student population.

Key findings showed that when we first asked students: “Are you planning to return to SF State?” Over half of the respondents (n = 156, 55%) indicated that they were **not** planning to return to San Francisco State. For students who indicated that they were **not** planning to return to SF State, we asked them: “What were your primary reason(s) for not returning to San Francisco State?” (n = 156). The top five responses indicated by students were: 1) Finances (39%), 2) Wanting to be closer to home (24%), 3) SF State did not feel like their campus (22%), 4) Personal issues (18%), and 5) Lack of social connections (15%). For students who indicated that they **were** planning to return to SF State or were **undecided**, we asked them: “What were your main reason(s) for not enrolling this fall 2018?” (n = 130). The top five responses indicated by students were: 1) Finances (44%), 2) Personal issues (25%), 3) Family responsibilities (12%), 4) Wanting to be closer to home (10%), and 5) Commuting (8%). When asked: “Is there something that SF State could have done differently that would have changed your decision to leave or take a break from SF State,” 100 students indicated that “Yes, SF State could have done something differently.” The top five qualitative themes expressed in student comments were related to: 1) Needing financial assistance, 2) Increasing outreach to students, 3) Increasing class availability, 4) Housing affordability, and 5) Students not feeling connected to the campus.

An intervention was employed to provide students with assistance for re-enrollment. Students were asked: “May we provide your information to advising that can assist you with re-enrollment?” and “Would you like us to send you an email with links to resources that could assist you with re-enrollment?” For those students who indicated that they would like assistance with re-enrollment, we contacted them by telephone and resources were sent through email.

The results of this study was presented to the First-Year Experience Committee (FYE Committee), the Department of Undergraduate Education and Academic Planning Council (DUEAP Council), and the Student Success and Graduation Initiative Committee (SSGI). After reviewing and discussing the results of this study, recommendations were made by the campus-wide FYE Committee.

Purpose of the Study

During the 2016-2017 academic year, San Francisco State University conducted the Foundations of Excellence (FoE) First-Year Self-Study in collaboration with the Gardner Institute. Faculty and staff members from Academic Affairs and Student Affairs & Enrollment Management participated throughout the duration of the academic year to determine barriers to success for our first-year students.

In fall 2017, the First-Year Experience Initiative was launched with the hiring of two directors including Grace Yoo, First-Year Experience Faculty Director and Chris Trudell, First-Year Experience Manager. Based on recommendations from the Foundations of Excellence Self-Study, the First-Year Experience Initiative has evolved and partnered with campus partners into the following:

- University-wide First-Year Experience Committee
- Outreach, Prospective Students and New Students
- Course Development & First-Year Seminars
- Faculty Development & First-Year Experience
- First-Year Experience Programming with Campus Partners
- First-Year student communications
- First-Year student assessments
- First-Year Peer Mentor Program

Since launching of the First-Year Experience Initiative, presentations with the existing data were communicated illustrating that 1-in-5 first-year students had left. In these campus wide presentations, questions were raised as to the reasons **why** students left San Francisco State within their first-year. Since Spring 2018, the First-Year Experience Committee has been meeting monthly during the academic year. In their monthly meetings, the First-Year Experience Committee also asked similar questions. They recommended the institution commission a survey to understand why students have left. Ultimately, the purpose of this project was to hear from students and to understand why they left SF State after their first-year.

Study Goals

The central goal of the study was to identify common factors which contribute to first-year students not retaining. We were seeking to:

- Identify factors that can be impacted by San Francisco State University.
- Increase awareness of these factors.
- Address factors (as possible) to reduce the loss of future first-year students.

Methodology

Our population of interest was the fall 2017 first-time freshmen students who did not return in their second year (i.e., fall 2018). A 12-item telephone survey was developed based upon existing literature about why students typically leave universities. Four peer transition mentors and one first-year experience graduate student assistant were trained on data collection protocol and were involved in the design of the survey. The student assistants reviewed & provided feedback to the telephone script and survey items. A tone of care for the data collection process was part of the student assistant training. The data were collected via Qualtrics.

The student assistants called students who left at least three times- noting to call at varied times of the day (i.e., morning, afternoon, and evening). If the student did not answer the phone call, a voicemail was left. A follow-up email was distributed to all non-responders after the third unsuccessful call.

Survey Demographics

Archival data were extracted for 4,323 students who enrolled in the fall 2017 first-time freshmen cohort. One-year retention data showed that of the 4,323 first-time freshmen who started in the fall 2017 term, 939 (21.7%) did not return by the start of their second year. These 939 students were our population of interest, as we sought to learn **why** these students did not return by the start of the fall 2018 semester.

In order to gain a deeper understanding about the students who left, demographic and academic characteristics were explored. Of the 939 students who left, the majority were female (n = 547, 58%, *Chart 1*) and between the ages of 18 to 19 years old (n = 926, 99%, *Chart 2*). The top three ethnicities represented were: Latinx (n = 436, 46%), White (n = 174, 19%), and Asian American (n = 109, 12%) (*Chart 3*) and over half of these students identified as traditionally underrepresented¹ (n = 502, 53%, *Chart 4*). A large proportion of these students came from Southern California (including San Diego) (n = 433, 46%) and from the Bay Area (6 counties) (n = 316, 34%) (*Chart 5*).

¹ Traditionally underrepresented includes students who identified as: American Indian, Black/African American, and Latinx.

Nearly nine in ten students enrolled full-time at entry (n = 815, 87%, *Chart 6*), the top three areas of study at entry were: Undeclared (n = 122, 13%), Pre-Nursing (n = 85, 9%), and Biology (n = 64, 7%) (*Chart 7*), and over half of these students lived in SF State housing during their first semester (n = 471, 51%, *Chart 8*).

Chart 1. The majority of students were female.

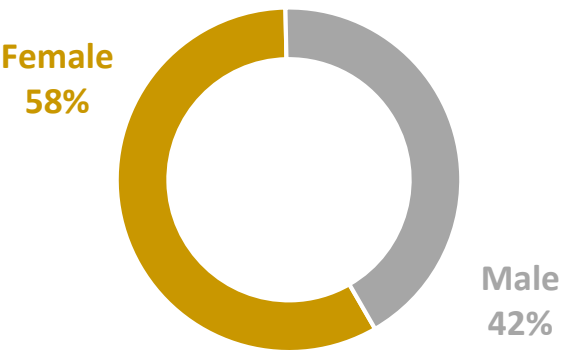


Chart 2. The majority of students were between the ages of 18-19 at entry.

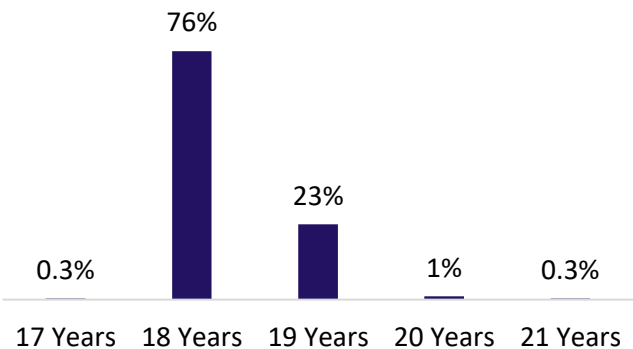


Chart 3. The top three ethnic groups were: Latinx, White, and Asian American.

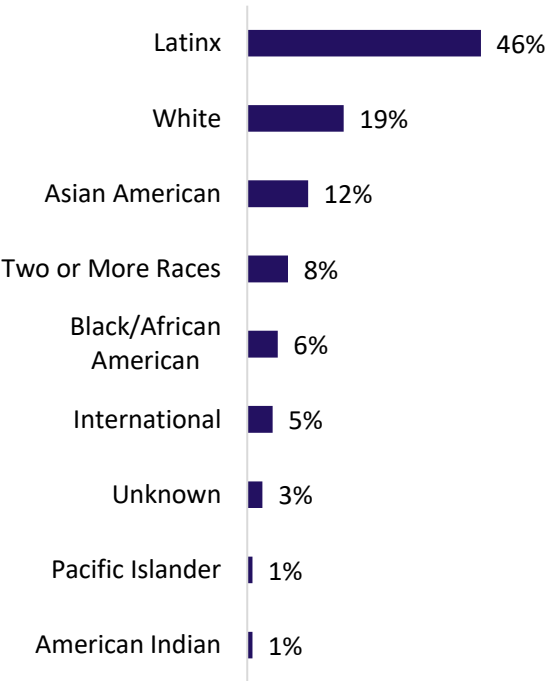


Chart 4. The majority of students were traditionally underrepresented.

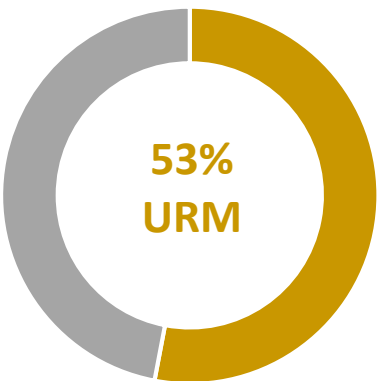


Chart 5. The majority of students arrived to SF State from the Bay Area and Southern California.

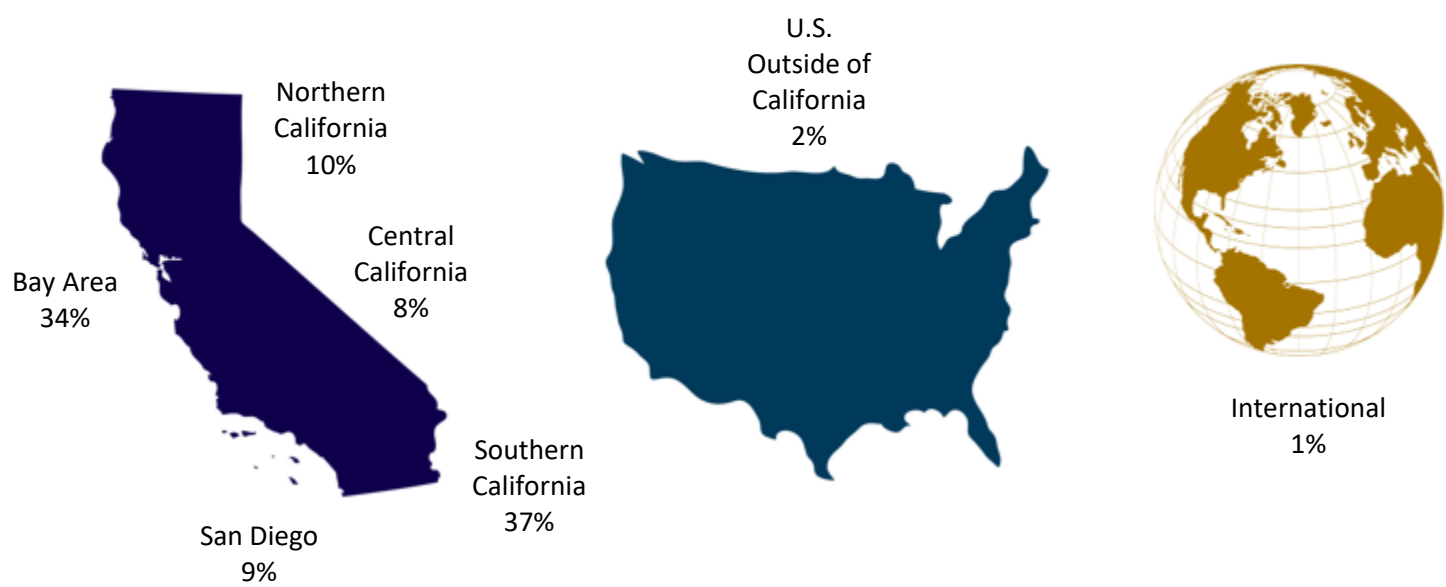


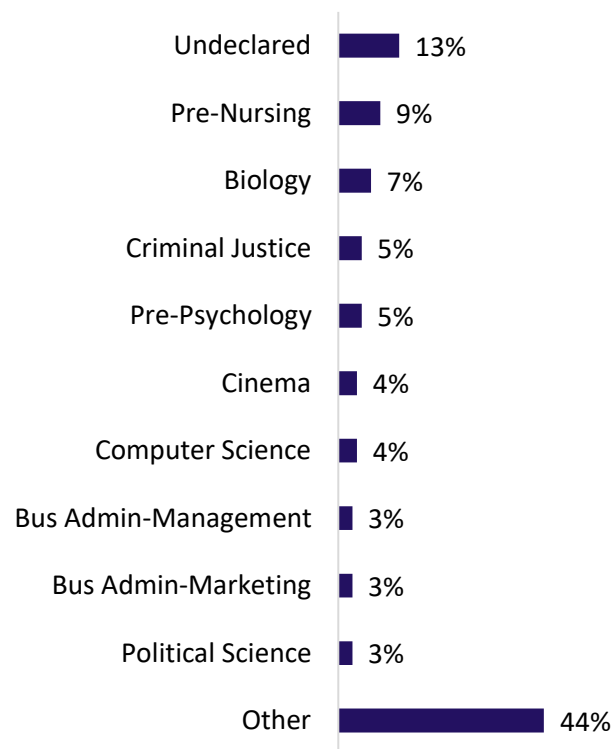
Chart 6. Nearly nine in ten students were full-time at entry.



Chart 8. The majority of students were in housing in their first-year.

51% of students were in SF State housing

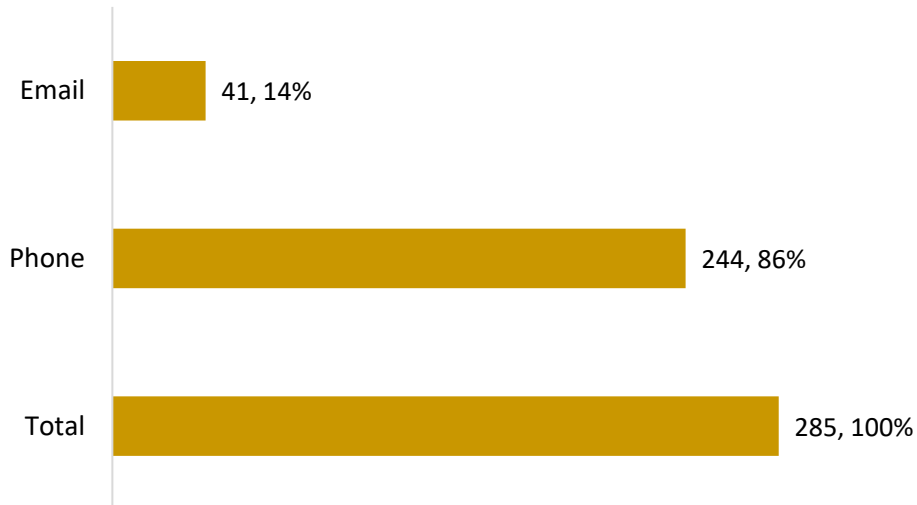
Chart 7. The top three areas of study were: 1. Undeclared, 2. Pre-Nursing, and 3. Biology.



Results

Response Rates

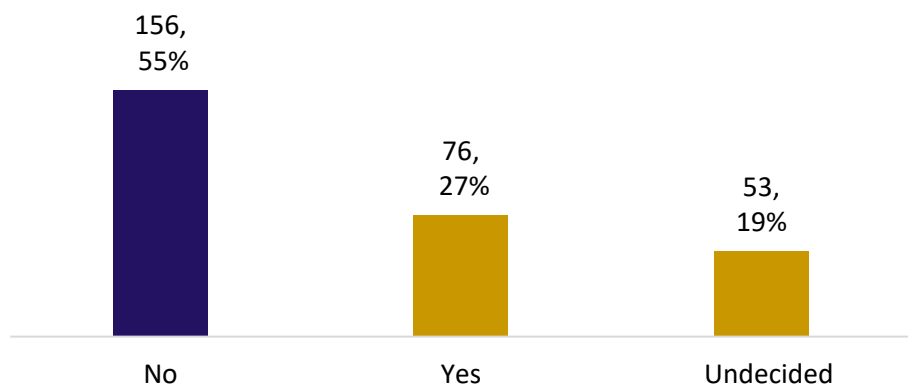
Chart 9. Response rate by email and phone (n = 285)



Survey data were successfully collected for 285 students ($285/939 = 30.4\%$) (*Chart 9*). The 30% threshold allows us to more confidently generalize the results from the sample to the overall first-year student population. The majority of responses were received by phone (n = 244, 86%) and the remaining responses were collected through email (n = 41, 14%). These results highlight the importance of the tone of care utilized during the phone calls, which yielded response rates above and beyond that of an email.

Quantitative Results

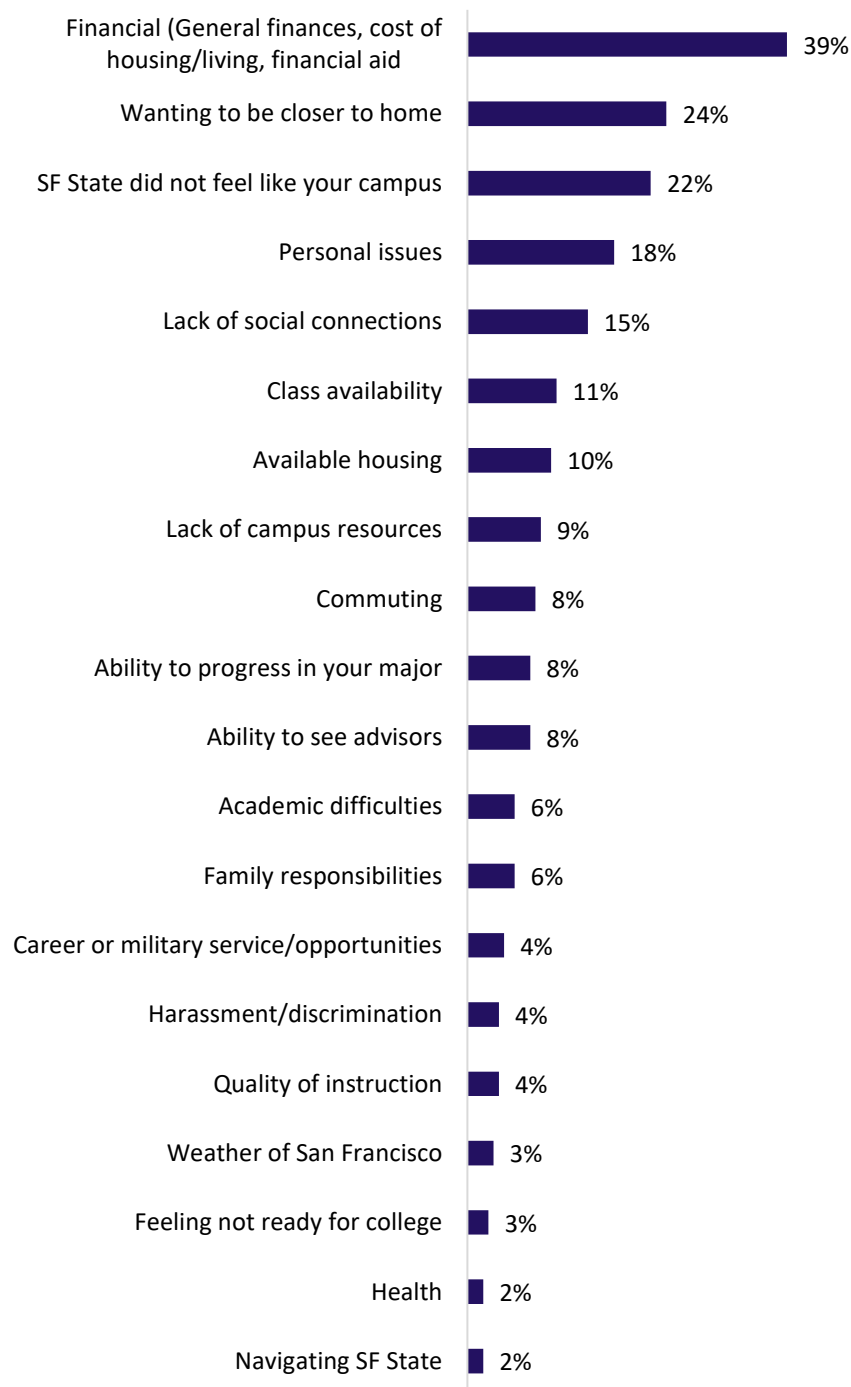
Chart 10. Are you planning to return to San Francisco State? (n = 285)



We first asked students: “Are you planning to return to SF State?” Over half of the respondents (n = 156, 55%) indicated that they were **not** planning to return to San Francisco State (*Chart 10*). While 27% (n = 76) indicated that they were planning to return and the remaining 19% (n = 53) were undecided (*Chart 10*).

For students who indicated that they were **not** planning to return to SF State, we asked them: “What were your primary reason(s) for **not** returning to San Francisco State?” The top five responses indicated by students were: 1) Finances (39%), 2) Wanting to be closer to home (24%), 3) SF State did not feel like their campus (22%), 4) Personal issues (18%), and 5) Lack of social connections (15%) (*Chart 11, n = 156*).

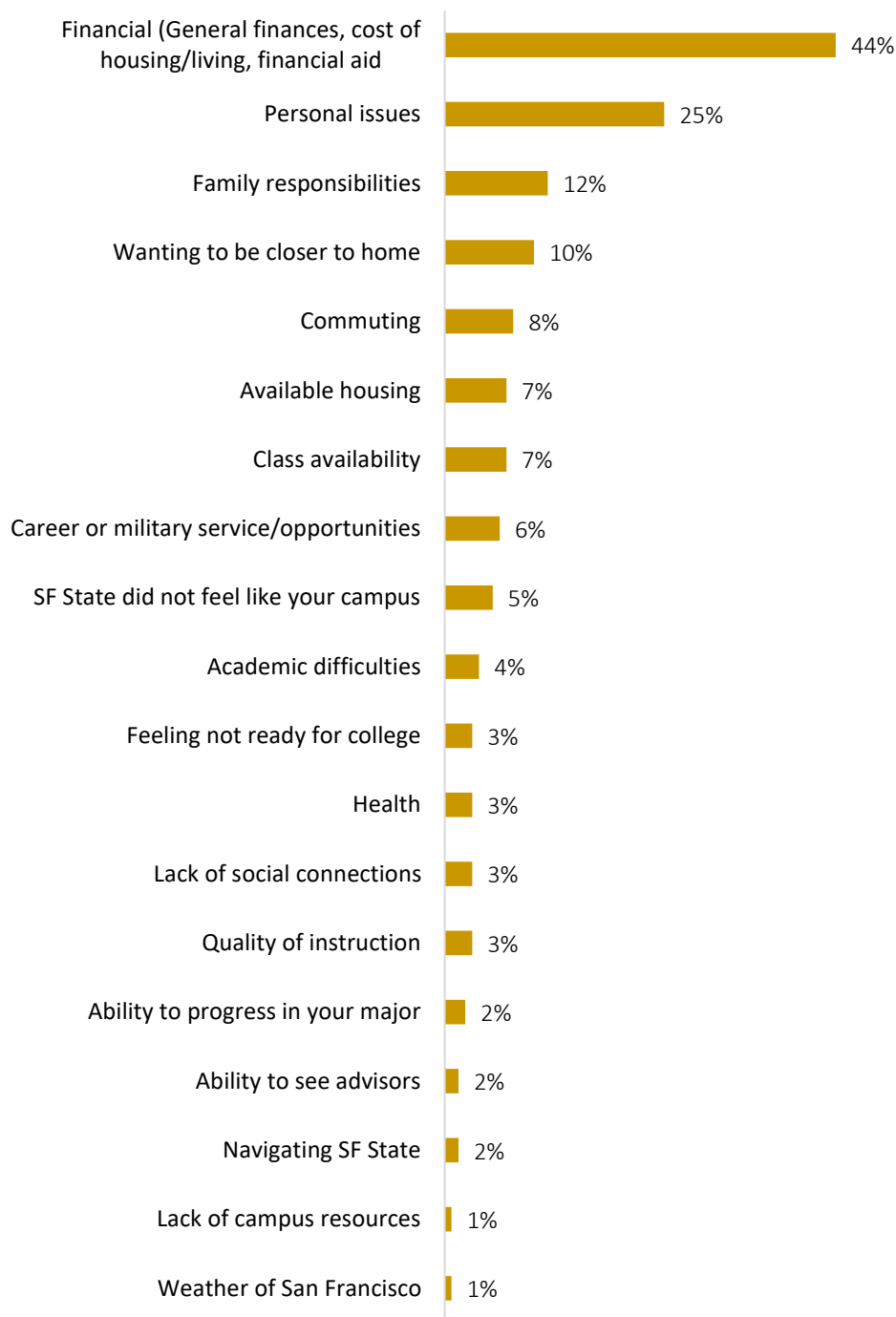
Chart 11. Reasons students indicated that they are not planning to return to SF State (n = 156)



Note: Percentages may sum to greater than 100% due to a check all that apply response option.

For students who indicated that they **were** planning to return to SF State or were **undecided**, we asked them: “What were your main reason(s) for **not** enrolling this fall 2018?” The top five responses indicated by students were: 1) Finances (44%), 2) Personal issues (25%), 3) Family responsibilities (12%), 4) Wanting to be closer to home (10%), and 5) Commuting (8%) (*Chart 12, n = 130*).

Chart 12. Reasons students indicated why they are taking a break from SF State (n = 130)



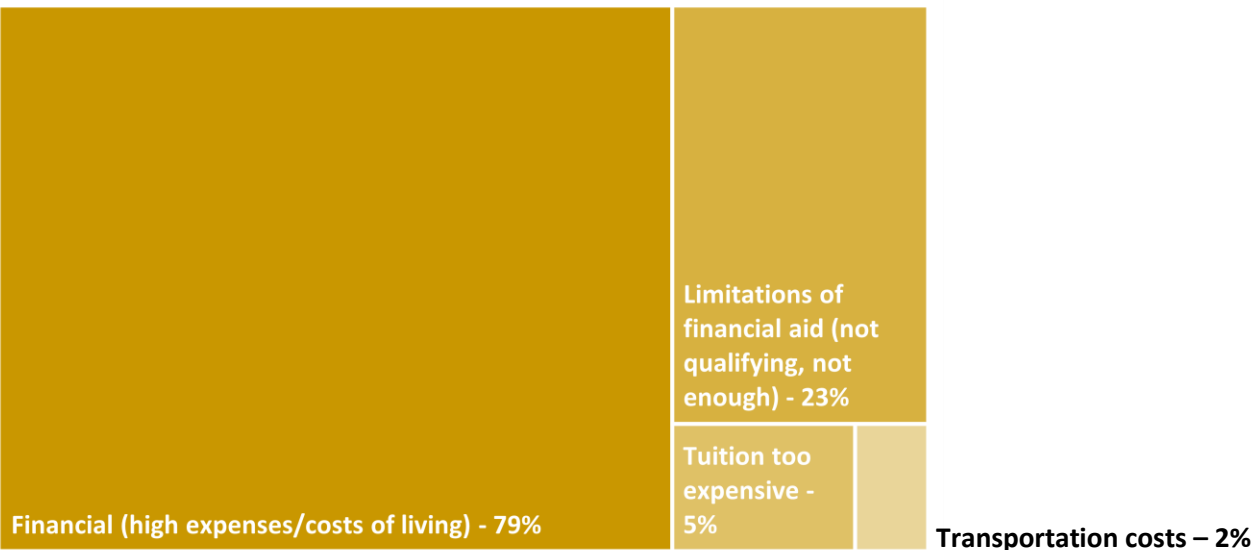
Note: Percentages may sum to greater than 100% due to a check all that apply response option.

The number one response for both students who reported that they were **not** planning to return to SF State and for those students who reported that they **were** planning to return to SF State or were **undecided** was that they left for financial reasons. For students who indicated that they left or were taking a break due to financial reasons, we asked them to be more specific in an open-ended format. Results showed that the majority of students indicated high expenses & costs of living (93% for students who left & 79% for students taking a break). Other reasons cited were: tuition is too expensive, limitations of financial aid, and transportation costs.

Chart 13. Students not planning to return to San Francisco State: Financial breakdown (n = 61)



Chart 14. Students taking a break from San Francisco State: Financial breakdown (n = 57)



Note: Percentages above may sum to greater than 100% due to a check all that apply response options.

Qualitative Results

When asked: “Is there something that SF State could have done differently that would have changed your decision to leave or take a break from SF State,” the majority of students (n = 185, 65%) indicated that “No, there was nothing that SF State could have done.” However, 100 students indicated that “Yes, SF State could have done something differently.”

These 100 students were asked: “Please state what SF State could have done differently” and provided with an open-ended response format. The top five themes expressed in student comments were related to: 1) Financial (20%), 2) Increasing outreach, resources & communications regarding campus services (17%), 3) Increasing class availability (16%), 4) Housing affordability/availability (10%), and 5) Students not feeling connected (9%).

1. Financial (20%)

Example student comments:

- *“Overall San Francisco State was a good school but City College was free. Trying to be financially reasonable.”*
- *“If SF State offered a payment plan I would have stayed. I was not offered one.”*
- *“It is a beautiful campus, I enjoyed being there, I just did not want to live in the city because it's expensive and I am used to a small town.”*

2. Increase outreach, resources & communication regarding campus services (17%)

Example student comments:

- *“I want SF State to be more communicative in a way that the programs, clubs, and resources on campus are seen and heard from students. It was difficult for me to know what the campus has to offer.”*
- *“Better communication and outreach to students regarding how to navigate and transcript issues.”*
- *“Educating more on administration. Didn't really know how to navigate the campus.”*

3. Increase class availability (16%)

Example student comments:

- *"I would love it for incoming students to get an idea of what an impacted major is before trying to succeed in an impacted major in four years. If I would have known how difficult it was to get the classes I needed to have for my major, I definitely would not have come to SFSU. In the future, it would be great if SFSU could address some of the overcrowding issues by actually allowing bigger class size and hiring more teachers for impacted majors. I found it ridiculous that I was paying close to four times as I spend on community college classes now, and somehow am receiving much higher quality education as well as the ease of being able to choose impacted classes without having to worry about them filling up in minutes."*
- *"More available seats for classes. It was hard to take the freshman classes because I missed the freshmen orientation due to family issues/emergency."*
- *"More classes and classes are posted late too with no clarification."*

4. Housing affordability/availability (10%)

Example student comments:

- *"I lived in the Village and played soccer on campus...It was fun and it was just mainly the cost to live out there."*
- *"Availability of on campus housing and the rent prices were too high."*
- *"Provide more housing, deliver financial awards earlier, and make housing more affordable to low-income students."*

5. Students did not feel connected (9%)

Example student comments:

- *"The only difference at school I wish there was is that there was more unity on campus, and that people were more social. I do not care about sports, but without it I notice there is not much going on on-campus."*
- *"San Francisco was a different experience for me. I just didn't vibe."*
- *"It wasn't for me. The school was not welcoming for me (for the students who live far away from home.)"*

Intervention

When asked, “Would you like assistance re-enrolling and/or links to resources that could assist you with re-enrollment?” A total of 55 students responded that they would appreciate links, resources or assistance with re-enrollment. The Office of Developmental Studies contacted these 55 students and provided them with links to resources that could assist them with re-enrollment. Of these 55 students, 7 students (13%) re-enrolled in the spring 2019 term and 5 students (9%) re-enrolled in the following fall 2019 term.

Recommendations

The results of this study was presented to the First-Year Experience Committee (FYE Committee), the Department of Undergraduate Education and Academic Planning Council (DUEAP Council), and the Student Success and Graduation Initiative Committee (SSGI). Unlike the literature that states that academic and social integration (Tinto 1975; 1993) and student involvement (Astin, 1984; 1985) are the key to retention, our study shows that financial costs serve as a cost barrier to retention above and beyond that of a sense of belonging. In triangulating this finding with other institution-wide studies, the [Campus Climate Survey Results](#) also showed that the number one reason our undergraduate students cited for seriously considering leaving SF State was “Cost of living in the Bay Area” (n = 268, 55.6%).

After reviewing and discussing the results of this study, the following recommendations were made by the campus-wide FYE Committee:

Maintain commitment and support of the 2016-2017 Foundations of Excellence report recommendations:

- A first-year faculty director from Academic Affairs and a first-year director from Student Affairs should be appointed/hired.
 - The Academic Senate should create a first-year experience steering committee consisting of campus members from Student Affairs, Academic Affairs and Associated Students.
 - This committee should be chaired by the First-Year Director from Student Affairs and the Faculty Director from Academic Affairs.
 - The Academic Senate should pass a resolution supporting a campus philosophy for the first-year which aligns with our mission.
 - A first-year peer mentoring program should be developed and supported financially.
 - An assessment plan should accompany any new FYE project.
 - All first-year students should take a first-year seminar. The FY Steering committee should investigate various models for such a seminar and make recommendations to the Academic Senate on the requirements for such a course.
 - New student orientation should be accessible for all incoming freshmen, in either an in-person or virtual format.
 - A communications plan for first-year students and their families should be created.
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- The University should recognize and reward excellence in FY teaching. First-year courses should be desirable teaching assignments that are sought after by excellent teachers.
 - Professional Development should be made available for all faculty and staff who regularly interact with first-year students.
 - The Center for Equity and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CEETL) should provide specific programming around engagement of first-year students in the classroom.
 - The University must find ways to engage students outside the classroom. The academic and non-academic aspects of student life must be integrated.

In addition to maintaining and supporting the 2016-2017 Foundations of Excellence Report Recommendations, the following recommendations were made by the campus-wide 2019-2020 First-Year Experience Committee (see Appendix A for detailed recommendations):

Financial

- Improve financial literacy among first-year students through increasing education & awareness.

Housing

- Continue to explore innovative housing partnerships and first-year engagement possibilities.

Removing Institutional Barriers

- Support and advise efforts to remove and revise institutional barriers facing first-year students.

Sense of Belonging

- Integrate, identify and include first-year contacts, programs and spaces across campus, including: Asian American and Pacific Islander Retention and Education (ASPIRE), Associated Students Inc., Educational Opportunity & Pathway Programs, FYE Committee, Health Promotion and Wellness, METRO, and other campus partners.
 - Create a first-year lounge space which will allow for connection other first-year students and provide a physical space for studying and resting in between classes
 - Create first-year commuter events, which will strengthen opportunities to develop a sense of belonging at SF State.
 - Collaborate with the Division of Equity and Inclusion in the planning and the building of a cross cultural center at SFSU.
 - Identify and support students who have not found social or community connection(s) through leveraging the BCSSE and NSSE data.
 - Support bilingual programs for our first-year students & faculty. For example, continue the implementation of the Spanish orientation programming.
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Appendix

Appendix A - Recommendations Explained

Financial

- Improve financial literacy among first-year students through increasing education & awareness:
 - We recommend that financial aid information be better integrated in New Student Orientation and extended orientation programming (i.e., GatorFest!).
 - We also recommend that lessons plans contextualize diverse student experiences around finances & financial literacy for faculty teaching first-year seminars and other first-year classes be developed in partnership with College of Business, faculty, CEETL and FYE.
 - We also recommend that financial literacy be considered in student learning outcomes in the Area E courses.
 - Include outreach, education, and workshops addressing financial related holds.
 - Included in New Student Orientation and GatorFest! Programming.

Housing

- Continue to explore innovative housing partnerships and first-year engagement possibilities:
 - We recommend that the campus continue to think and plan for unique housing partnerships with local entities (e.g. golf course) and companies (e.g. Park Merced) and cities/counties (e.g. Daly City/ San Mateo County).
 - Explore potential partnerships with Airbnb/Vrbo/private entities for temporary housing and other short term homelessness solutions that could be extended long term.

Removing Institutional Barriers

- Better support the efforts to remove and revise institutional barriers
 - Registration holds that may impede registration and retention for first-year students.
 - Acknowledging changes in general education requirements and increasing awareness/education to students, faculty and staff.
 - Increased advising for first-year students.
 - Increased class availability for first-year students.
 - Updated web pages across campus.
- Create professional development for staff on the first-year experience

Sense of Belonging

- Work to create a first-year lounge space:
 - We recommend that available space is assessed to host this lounge and work with capital planning on considerations for first-year space.
- Work to create first-year commuter events.
- Integrate, identify and include first-year contacts, programs and spaces across campus, including: Asian American and Pacific Islander Retention and Education (ASPIRE), Associated Students Inc., Educational Opportunity & Pathway Programs, FYE Committee, Health Promotion and Wellness, METRO, and other campus partners.
 - We recommend identifying key offices students, staff, and faculty can talk to considering first-year student transitions and supportive resources
- Collaborate with Division of Equity and Inclusion in the planning and the building of a cross cultural center in the middle of campus
- Identify and support students who do not have easily identified communities
 - We recommend that faculty in the first-year courses encourage students to attend a newly created Fall student resource and organization faire that occurs within the first 6 weeks of school
- Support bilingual programs for our first-year students & faculty
 - Collaborate with Student Outreach Services (SOS) and Strategic Marketing and Communications (SMAC)
 - Consider more workshops and increase visibility at New Student Orientation and during move-in/GatorFest!
 - Multilingual resources for the “Real Talk for Parents” presentation at Summer Orientation
 - Create online resources
 - Evaluate key resources that parents/families/student supporters may seek that can be translated into the primary language spoken at home:
 - Dean-On-Call Program translation.
 - Financial Aid resources/services translation.
 - Bursar resources/services translation.
 - Housing resources/services translation.
 - Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS) translations.
 - Student Health Center resource/services translations.
 - Academic Advising information translations.
 - Health & Promotion Wellness.
 - First-Year Experience webpage.

Appendix B - Survey Instrument

1. Student ID
2. Are you planning to return to SF State?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
 - c) Undecided
3. What were your main reason(s) for not enrolling this fall 2018? (Display this item if: Are you planning to return to SF State? Yes or Undecided is selected)
 - a) Ability to progress in your major
 - b) Ability to see advisors
 - c) Academic difficulties
 - d) Available housing
 - e) Career or military service/opportunities
 - f) Class availability
 - g) Commuting
 - h) Cost of housing/Cost of Living
 - i) Family responsibilities
 - j) Feeling not ready for college
 - k) Finances (Please specify):
 - l) Financial Aid
 - m) Harassment/discrimination
 - n) Health
 - o) Lack of campus resources
 - p) Lack of social connections
 - q) Navigating SF State
 - r) Personal issues
 - s) Quality of instruction
 - t) SF State did not feel like your campus
 - u) Wanting to be closer to home
 - v) Weather of San Francisco
 - w) Other (Please specify):

4. What were your primary reason(s) for not returning to San Francisco State? (Display this item if: Are you planning to return to SF State? No is selected)

- a) Ability to progress in your major
- b) Ability to see advisors
- c) Academic difficulties
- d) Available housing
- e) Career or military service/opportunities
- f) Class availability
- g) Commuting
- h) Cost of housing/Cost of Living
- i) Family responsibilities
- j) Feeling not ready for college
- k) Finances (Please specify):
- l) Financial Aid
- m) Harassment/discrimination
- n) Health
- o) Lack of campus resources
- p) Lack of social connections
- q) Navigating SF State
- r) Personal issues
- s) Quality of instruction
- t) SF State did not feel like your campus
- u) Wanting to be closer to home
- v) Weather of San Francisco
- w) Other (Please specify):

5. Is there something that SF State could have done differently that would have changed your decision to leave SF State?

- a) Yes
- b) No

6. Is there something SF State could have done differently that would have prevented you from taking a break?

- a) Yes
 - b) No
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7. Please state what SF State could have done differently. Open-ended text box:
8. Do you need assistance re-enrolling at SF State?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
9. May we provide your information to advising that can assist you with re-enrollment?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
10. What is your preferred method of contact?
- Phone:
- Email:
11. Would you like us to send you an email with links to resources that could assist you with re-enrollment?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
12. What is the best email to contact you with?
- Email:

References to Inform Survey Item Construction

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