

The Match Factor: Exploring the Match Between Expectations  
and Experiences and Its Effect on Student Retention

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the key factors in retention is how well student experiences match expectations. In order to assess how well the experiences of first-time, full-time students matched expectations at TCU, telephone interviews were conducted in March/April 2005 with returning and non-returning students who entered the University as first-time, full-time students in Fall 2004. A second set of interviews was conducted in May/June 2005 with entering Fall 2004 freshmen who had been enrolled in the Spring 2005 semester but had not enrolled for the Fall 2005 semester. The interview completion rate among those contacted was 86%, 78%, and 70.5% for the Spring 2005 returners, the Spring 2005 non-returners, and the Fall 2005 non-enrollees respectively. Respondents in all groups were asked identical questions regarding how well their experiences matched the expectations they had upon coming to the University in a variety of academic and social areas and rated the match between their experiences and expectations on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating 'No Match' and 5 indicating an 'Excellent Match'.

There were no differences among the groups in regard to how well academic experiences matched academic expectations. The scores on the academic expectations match scale were relatively low across all groups. However, the differences among the groups in regard to how well social experiences matched social expectations were statistically significant. The returners were more likely to report that their social experiences matched their social expectations than were the non-returners. There were two areas of incongruence that stood out among the non-returners, the residence hall experience and the academic advising experience. The academic advising experience was also the area of greatest incongruence between experiences and expectations for returning students. There were no significant differences in the rate of co-curricular participation or rush participation between the returning and non-returning groups. All three groups of students were also asked if they had a class that they particularly liked and a class they particularly disliked during their first semester or year. There were no significant differences among the groups regarding liking or disliking a class.

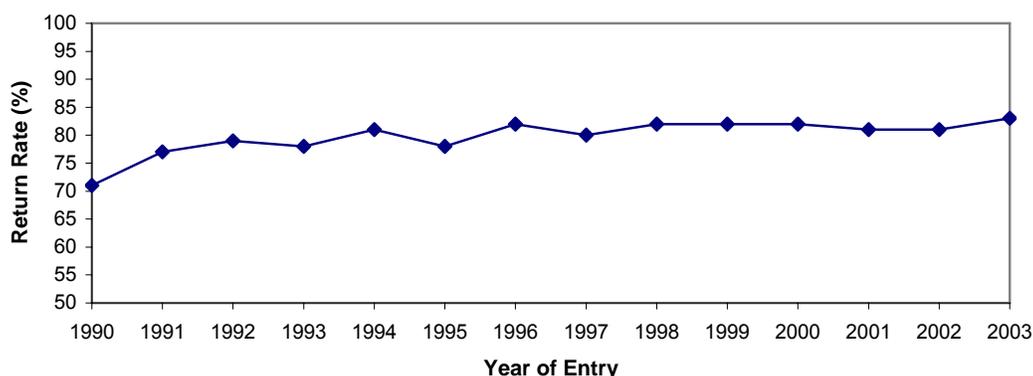
The students were asked to give one or two factors that led to their decision to return or not return to TCU for the Spring or Fall semester. The Spring 2005 returning students most often mentioned returning because they liked the people, the campus environment, the academics and the professors. The Spring 2005 non-returning students' most common response had to do with an inability to make connections with others, followed by the cost of attending TCU, and personal reasons. Students in the Fall 2005 non-enrolled group most frequently cited increased tuition costs and finances as the primary reasons they did not plan to return to TCU in the fall, followed by social reasons. The Spring 2005 non-returning students were also asked if they were currently enrolled elsewhere. There were two trends evident among the non-returning students who indicated that they were currently enrolled in college. First, of those students who were out-of-state, all but 4 who transferred, transferred to a school in their home state. Second, of the Texas students who transferred, most went to a public school in Texas.

These findings suggest that there may be real differences between the students who return and those who do not return to TCU regarding how well their first year social experiences match their expectations. They also imply that there is some real disappointment among all students regarding how well their academic experiences match their expectations. Since the fulfillment of social and academic expectations influences social and academic integration which in turn effects student retention, this topic warrants further study in order to identify specific areas that may benefit from program or policy changes. Program or policy changes grounded in real data stand a better chance of improving the potential for a match between student experiences and expectations, resulting in better social and academic integration, and ultimately persistence to graduation.

## INTRODUCTION

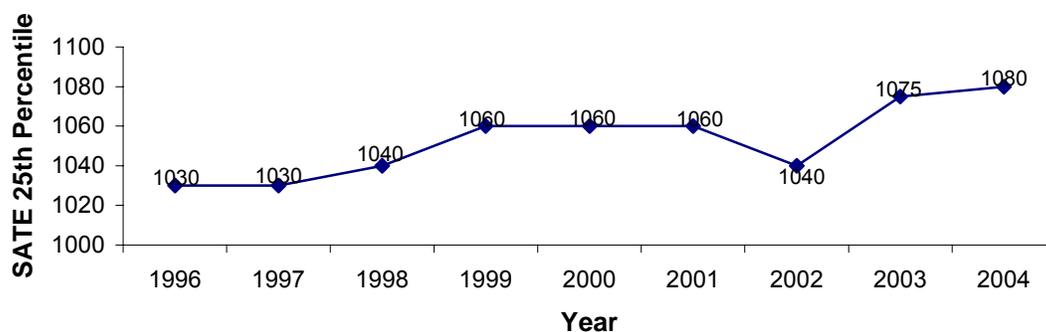
Since hitting a low point of 71% retained for the entering freshman class of 1990, the TCU freshman retention rate has risen steadily from the low 70s to the low 80s. The most dramatic gains in freshman retention came between 1990 and 1994 where the retention rate jumped a full ten percentage points from 71% to 81%. With the exception of a dip back to 78% for the entering freshman of 1995, the retention rate for first-time, full-time students has hovered in the low 80s since then, rising to a 14-year high of 83.4% for the 2003 entering freshman class. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. TCU Freshman Retention Rate 1990 -- 2003



During this same time, TCU has become increasingly selective. The 25<sup>th</sup> percentile<sup>1</sup> of SAT equivalent scores rose by 50 points from 1996<sup>2</sup> through 2004 (see Figure 2 below) and the percentage of applicants accepted<sup>3</sup> has declined from 80.3% in 1990 to 63.9% in 2004 (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 2. TCU SATE 25<sup>th</sup> Percentile Scores 1996 – 2004



<sup>1</sup> An unpublished internal TCU analysis of retention predictors among Tier 1, 2, 3, and 4 schools as identified by the *U.S. News and World Report America's Best Colleges 2003* found that the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile SATE strongly correlated with freshman retention ( $r = .853, p < .01$ ).

<sup>2</sup> SATE scores prior to 1996 are not comparable to SATE scores after 1996 because of the adjustments made to the SAT in 1995.

<sup>3</sup> The same internal study noted above found a moderate, negative correlation between acceptance rates and retention rates ( $r = -.612, p < .01$ ).

Figure 3. TCU Acceptance Rates 1990 – 2004

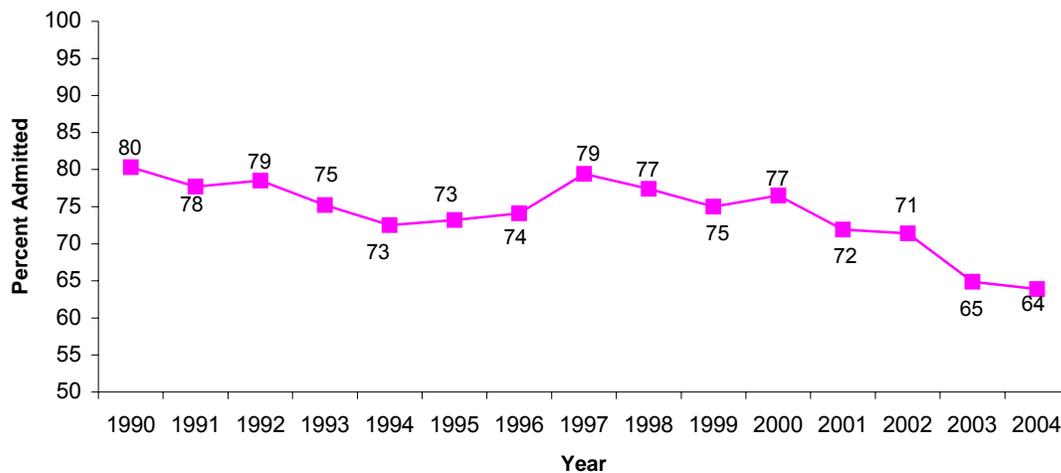
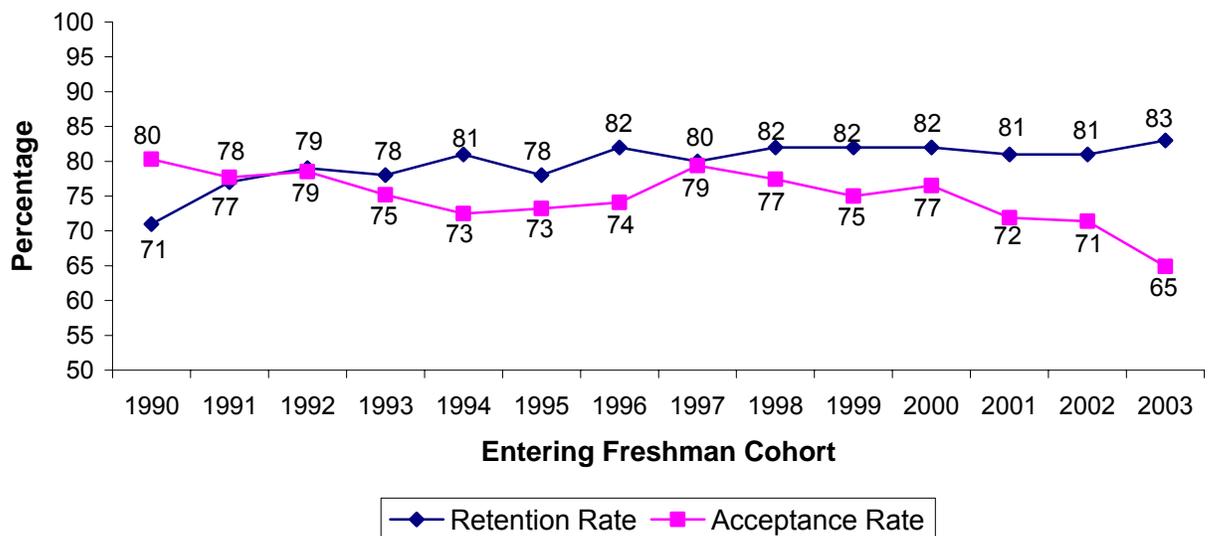


Figure 4 below juxtaposes the TCU retention rates and acceptance rates from 1990 - 2003, illustrating the negative relationship between the two rates.

Figure 4. TCU Retention and Acceptance Rates 1990 – 2003



Since entering student characteristics are the most important factors in determining an institution's freshman retention rate and persistence to graduation (Astin and Oseguera 2005), it is likely that the increased selectivity of TCU during the past 15 years has contributed to the retention gains over the past decade and a half. Despite the dramatic improvement in freshman retention since 1990, TCU remains slightly below average in freshman retention compared to its self-identified peers<sup>4</sup> which had an average first-year retention rate of 85.7% for Fall 2003 entering freshmen compared to

<sup>4</sup> Baylor, Creighton, Drake, Marquette, Pepperdine, SMU, and Tulane. Source: TCU Fall 2004 Fact Book, p. 9. Figure does not include aspirant institutions.

83.4% retention of this class at TCU. TCU's most recent retention rate of 83.4% is closer to the average retention rate for selective, PhD granting universities as classified by ACT which is 83.5% (Farnum and Buckley 2005). Theresa Farnum, a retention specialist and consultant hired by the University in Spring 2005, suggests that a first-year retention rate of 88% (one standard deviation above the average retention rate for selective schools) is a reasonable expectation for TCU within five years. For TCU to reach this goal within five years, there must first be a better understanding of the factors other than entering student characteristics which influence student retention.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The overwhelming majority of students who leave the institution in which they initially enrolled do so during or following the first year (Naylor and Sanford 1982; Tinto 1993). Although there is no general typology or prototype of students who leave versus those who persist, there are several common themes which emerge in the study of student retention that allude to conditions which are conducive to withdrawal or persistence. The most common theme which emerges from the literature is that of integration into the university community. Research has consistently found that individuals who withdraw from college tend to be less integrated into the college and university community than those who stay (Astin 1993; Billson and Terry 1987; Braxton and Mundy 2001-2002; McLaughlin, Brozovsky, and McLaughlin 1998; Tinto 1982, 1993).

Integration into the university community and whether a student's experiences mesh with their expectations are intimately related. Brower (1992) found that the fulfillment (or not) of expectations influenced integration and consequently persistence. "Students will be more integrated into college life, and consequently achieve greater successes, when they find what they are looking for—when a congruence exists between their perceptions and expectations and what they find in the institution" (Brower 1992: 456-57). Incongruence between expectations and experiences can occur in academic and/or social areas. Braxton, Vespar, and Hossler (1995) found that the extent to which academic and social expectations were met exerted a positive influence on academic and social integration which in turn influenced institutional commitment and intent to return. Helland, Stallings, and Braxton (2001-2002) provide additional support for the relationship between expectation fulfillment, social integration, and retention finding that the fulfillment of social expectations positively influenced social integration which in turn positively affected institutional commitment which had a direct effect on students' re-enrollment decisions.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1983: 219) suggest that initial campus experiences may be the ultimate trump card in student retention noting that "what happens to a student after arrival on campus may have greater impact on persistence than either the background characteristics or personal commitments to the institution and the goal of graduation from college." Subsequent research on expectations, experiences, and retention supports this supposition. Villella and Hu (1990: 84) found that "a student's intent to return or not return to the University is related to the degree with which his/her expectations of the University were met." Students whose experiences were better than expected or the same as what they expected were more likely to express an intent to return than students whose experiences were slightly worse or substantially worse than expected.

Findings that congruence between expectations and early experiences influence the degree of academic and social integration shed new light on the dynamics of the process of integration into the university community and add import to the idea of "truth in advertising" and accuracy in the portrayal of the university and what it has to offer

students during the recruitment process (Braxton and Mundy 2001-2002; Braxton et al. 1995). The match between student expectations and experiences is evaluated by students at a relatively early stage in the collegiate experience and the extent to which early expectations are met can greatly influence the degree of academic and social integration achieved and subsequent institutional commitment (Braxton et al. 1995; Helland et al. 2001-2002). If the reality experienced by first-year students does not mesh with their expectations, they will be at greater risk for withdrawal (Braxton and Mundy 2001-2002).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given that the congruence between expectations and experience is a key precursor to academic and social integration, institutional commitment, and ultimately retention, this study seeks to answer the principle question:

- Are there differences in how well expectations and experiences match between those students who return to TCU for subsequent semesters and those who do not return after the first or second semester?

In order to better understand the findings of the above question, several secondary questions will also be asked.

- In what areas do students experience the greatest incongruence between expectations and experiences?
- Are there differences in the rate of social fraternity/sorority recruitment participation and experiences between returning and non-returning students?
- Are there differences in rates or type of co-curricular participation between returning and non-returning students?
- Are there differences between returning and non-returning students regarding classes liked or disliked?
- What are the top reasons that TCU first-year students return or do not return for a second semester or year?
- Where do students who leave TCU go?

## METHODOLOGY

One hundred six students who had enrolled as first-time, full-time freshmen in Fall 2004 did not re-enroll for the Spring 2005 semester. Four students were eliminated from this group because their withdrawal was non-voluntary. The remaining 102 students became the sample of non-returners. A stratified random sample of 102 returning students was drawn for comparison. The returning student sample was matched to the non-returning sample by first stratifying the returning Fall 2004 Entering Freshman population by college, ethnicity, and gender. The number of students selected from each sub-group was determined by the number of students in that sub-group in the non-returner sample. These two groups were interviewed by telephone in March and April

2005. A second round of telephone interviews in May and June 2005 was conducted with Fall 2004 entering freshmen who had been enrolled in the Spring 2005 semester, but who did not register for the Fall 2005 semester. There were 116 students in this sample.

Approximately one week before the telephone interviews were to begin, a letter from the TCU Chancellor's Office was sent to all sample members advising them of the impending phone call and requesting participation in the study. Study participants were offered the chance to be entered into a drawing for a \$250 gift certificate for completing the telephone interview. Telephone interviews were conducted primarily in the evenings from 6-9pm, Monday through Thursday for two and a half weeks in late March and early April 2005 and from 5-9 pm during the last week of May and the first week of June. Data from the telephone interviews were entered directly into an on-line survey program by the interviewers. See Appendix A for a list of survey items.

Respondents in all groups were asked identical questions regarding how well their experiences matched the expectations that they had when coming to TCU for a variety of academic and social areas. Respondents rated the match between their experiences and expectations on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating 'No Match' and 5 indicating an 'Excellent Match' and to give one example of how their experiences did not match their expectations if they rated any item less than three. In an effort to better understand any possible differences between returning and non-returning/non-enrolled students, the respondents were also asked if they had a class they particularly liked and a class they particularly disliked and to tell what they liked or disliked about the class. Students in all groups were also asked to indicate whether they participated in any co-curricular activities and if so, to tell what those co-curricular activities were.

In addition, in the first round of interviews, returning students were asked to give one or two reasons why they came back to TCU for the Spring semester while non-returning students were asked to identify one or two factors that contributed to their decision not to come back to TCU for the Spring semester. Non-returning students were also asked if TCU could have done anything different that might have encouraged them to stay, if they were currently enrolled elsewhere, and what their enrollment plans were for Fall 2005. In the second round of interviews, the Fall 2005 Non-enrolled students were asked if there was anything that TCU could do to facilitate their return for the Fall 2005 semester. On average, the telephone interviews lasted about 10-15 minutes.

## FINDINGS

Each sample in the March/April interviews had 102 potential participants. The May/June sample had 116 potential participants. As might be expected, more contacts were made with the returning group than the non-returning groups. Of the 102 Spring 2005 returners, contact was made with 62.7%. Among those returners contacted, 86% participated in the telephone interview. Contact was made with 50% of the Spring 2005 non-returners. Of the 51 non-returning students contacted, 40 agreed to participate in the interview resulting in a response rate among those contacted of 78%. There were 116 students in the group who were enrolled for the Spring 2005 semester, but had not yet registered for the Fall 2005 semester. Contact was made with 53% of these students. The response rate (interview completion rate) among those contacted was 70.5%. There were no significant differences on basic demographic characteristics between those contacted and those not contacted in any sample group. Likewise, among those contacted, there were no significant differences between those who completed the interview and those who declined within the three groups. There were six students who had been selected for the random sample of Spring 2005 returning

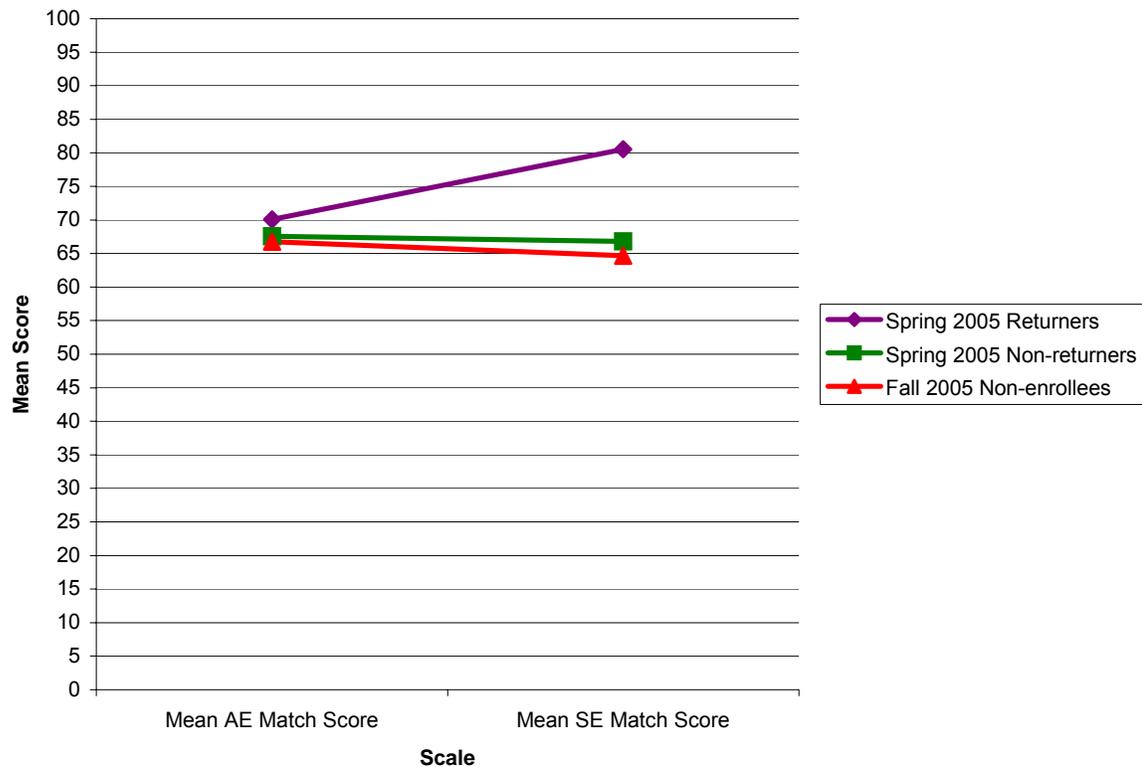
students who were also in the Non-enrolled for Fall 2005 group. However, only one student completed both interviews and the two groups were treated as independent groups.

The responses to the fixed choice questions were analyzed in two ways. First, the items were grouped into two scales, Academic Expectations Match and Social Expectations Match. The Academic Expectations Match scale included six items: Level of Academic Challenge, Academic Advising, Student-Faculty Interactions In the Classroom, Student-Faculty Interactions Outside the Classroom, Interactions with Non-Faculty Staff, and Interactions with Other Students In the Classroom. The Social Expectations Match scale included: Campus Environment, Campus Social Opportunities, Residence Hall, Interactions with other Students Outside the Classroom and, for students who participated in Rush, Rush Expectations.

Both scales range from 0, no match, to 100, an excellent match. The higher the score, the better the match. To compute the scores, each scale item was first converted from a 5-point scale to a 100-point scale. The items were then added together and the final scale score was obtained by dividing the total by the number of items in the equation. The reliability of the Academic Expectations Match scale was not as strong as we would have liked ( $\alpha = .61$ ). The Social Expectations Match scale was more reliable ( $\alpha = .76$  for those who participated in Rush and  $\alpha = .73$  for those not participating in Rush). The mean score for all groups on the Academic Expectations Match scale was 68.33. The mean score for all groups on the Social Expectations Match Scale was 71.76. These findings suggest that, overall, there is some disconnect between what students expect and what they actually experience once they arrive at TCU.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted on each scale to answer the research question, "Are there differences in how well expectations and experiences match between those students who return to TCU for subsequent semesters and those who do not return after the first or second semester?" No significant difference was found among the groups on the Academic Experience Match Scale ( $F(2,134)=.655, p > .05$ ). The students from the three groups did not differ significantly in regard to how well their academic experiences matched their academic expectations. A significant difference was found among the groups on the Social Expectations Match Scale ( $F(2,132)=10.14, p < .001$ ). A Tamhane post hoc test was used to determine the nature of the differences between the groups. This analysis revealed that the Spring 2005 returners were more likely to report that their social experiences matched their expectations ( $m = 80.54, sd = 12.33$ ) than were the Spring 2005 non-returners ( $m = 66.79, sd = 24.43$ ) and the Non-enrolled for Fall 2005 group ( $m = 64.66, sd = 20.03$ ). See Figure 5 below. There was no significant difference between the Spring 2005 non-returning and Fall 2005 non-enrolled groups. The disparate variance between the Spring 2005 returning students and the Spring 2005 non-returners and Fall 2005 non-enrolled students suggests that the social experiences among the latter two groups were much more varied than those among the Spring 2005 returners.

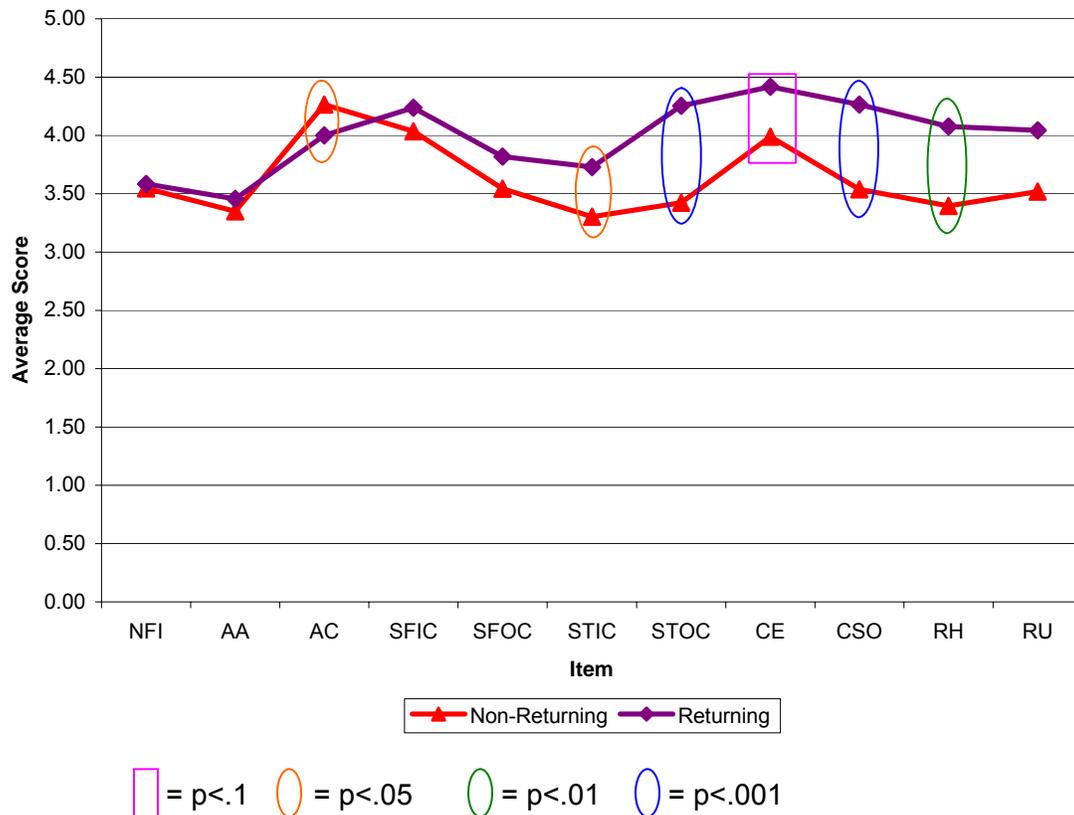
Figure 5. Mean Scores on the Academic Expectations (AE) Match Scale and Social Expectations (SE) Match Scale by return/enrollment status



The above scales provide a sense of the “big picture” in regard to differences between the students who returned to TCU for the Spring 2005 semester and the students who did not return to TCU for the Spring 2005 semester or enroll for the Fall 2005 semester. The second part of the analysis of the fixed choice items compared the individual item responses of the Spring 2005 returners to the Spring 2005 non-returners and the Fall 2005 non-enrollees as a group. A Mann Whitney U test was performed on each of these eleven items providing additional detail about the differences between the two groups.

As might be expected from the comparisons above, most of the differences between the groups were on items that addressed the match between social expectations and experiences. Non-returning students were significantly less likely to report that their experiences matched their expectations than were returning students on three items: Campus Social Opportunities (CSO), Student Interactions Outside the Classroom (STOC) (both significant at  $p < .001$ ), and Residence Hall (RH) experiences ( $p < .01$ ). The difference between the two groups regarding Campus Environment (CE) trended toward significance at  $p = .08$  with returning students reporting that their expectations and experiences matched more often than non-returning students. There were significant differences between the returning and non-returning students on two items from the Academic Expectations Match Scale: Academic Challenge (AC) and Student Interactions in the Classroom (STIC). The non-returning students reported more incongruence between their expectations and experiences than did the returning students regarding Student Interactions in the Classroom ( $p < .05$ ). The one area where non-returning students reported a greater match between expectations and experiences than did returning students was Academic Challenge ( $p < .05$ ). See Figure 6 below.

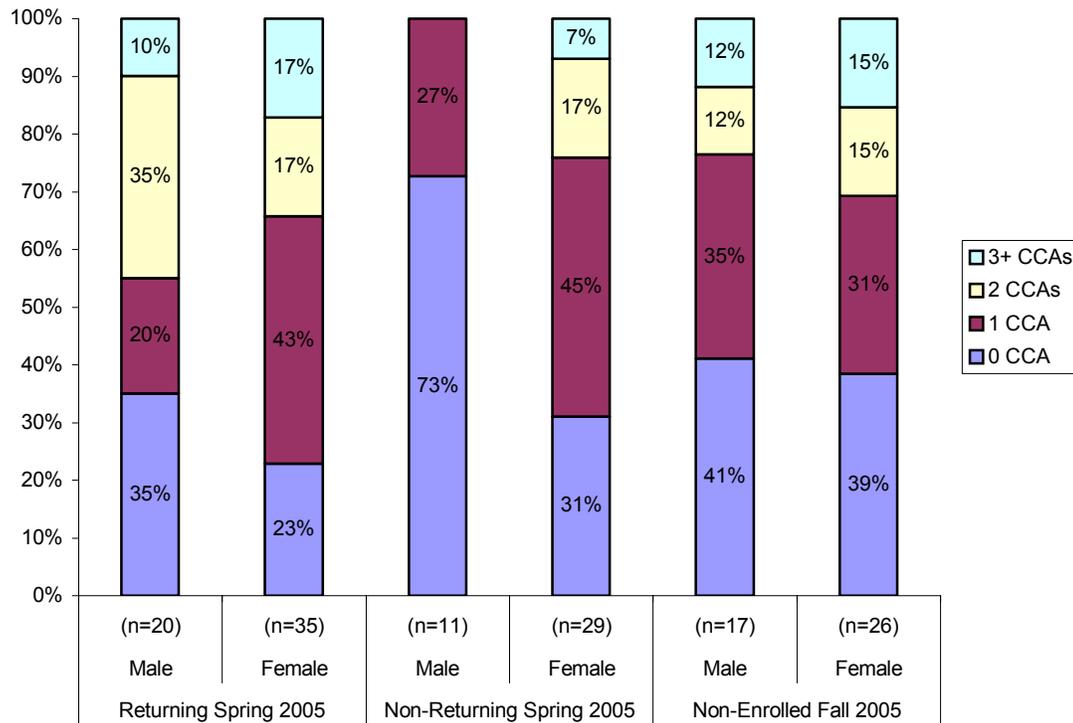
Figure 6. Comparison of Average Scores on Individual Items between Returning and Non-Returning Students



### Co-Curricular Activities and Social Fraternity/Sorority Recruitment

When we think of activities which might influence the degree to which social experiences and expectations matched two things come to mind: participation in co-curricular activities and social fraternity/sorority recruitment. We wanted to find out if there were differences in these areas between returning and non-returning students and so asked the research questions: Are there differences in rates or type of co-curricular participation between returning and non-returning students? and Are their differences in the rate of social fraternity/sorority recruitment participation and experiences between returning and non-returning students? There were no significant differences in the rate of co-curricular participation or rush participation between the returning and non-returning groups. The most frequent type of co-curricular activity noted among returning students was participation in TCU Leadership Programs, Greek organizations, religious oriented groups, and intramural sports. The most frequent type of participation reported by non-enrolled Fall 2005 was in religious oriented groups, followed by Greek organizations, and sports clubs. Spring 2005 non-returning students were most frequently involved in Departmental/Academic groups, followed by Greek organizations, and religious oriented groups. Returning Spring 2005 females reported the highest levels of participation in Co-Curricular Activities while Non-returning Spring 2005 males reported the lowest rates of co-curricular participation overall (see Figure 7). It should be noted that non-returning Spring 2005 males comprised the smallest group of respondents.

Figure 7. Number of Co-Curricular Activities Reported by Return Status and Sex



### Class Liked/Disliked

We were curious as to what role the classroom experience might play in the academic and social integration process and asked the question "Are there differences between returning and non-returning students regarding classes liked or disliked?" To address this issue, all three groups of students were asked if they had a class that they particularly liked and a class they particularly disliked during their first semester or year. There were no significant differences among the groups regarding liking or disliking a class. Students who did not return for the Spring 2005 semester or enroll for the Fall 2005 semester were no more likely to report disliking a class than were returning students. Nor were the returning Spring 2005 students more likely to report liking a class than were the Spring 2005 non-returned or the Fall 2005 non-enrollees. In all cases, students talking about a class they liked most often attributed it to the professor and his or her teaching style. The groups used words such as smart, accessible, fun, funny, good teacher, well-prepared, dynamic, passionate, and personable to describe the professors in those classes that they particularly liked. Students in all groups also noted that the classes that they liked were smaller and had lots of interaction and students tended to like the subject in those classes. When asked to describe what they disliked about a class, students in all groups most often mentioned the professor and class structure. Words they used to describe the professors in the classes they disliked included boring, condescending, impersonal, unprepared, disorganized, not fair, biased, inexperienced, and sporadic. Students also noted that the class structure was not interactive and a number of students noted that they disliked the subject.

### Areas of Incongruence Between Expectations and Experiences

To answer the question, “In what areas do students experience the greatest incongruence between expectations and experiences?” students were asked to give one example of what their expectations were and how they were not met if they rated any expectation/experience match less than three. Non-returning Spring 2005 students chose to talk most often about their experiences in the residence hall and with academic advising. In regard to their residence hall experiences, non-returning students said that there was a lack of community, the residents were not friendly, and they had trouble getting along with their roommates. One respondent said “It wasn’t a very good experience—I guess I expected there to be more people around more of the time—especially on the weekends—I mean, all the girls around me were great girls, but I found myself alone a lot of the time...” Another non-returning student described her residence hall experience as awful. “It was awful. I had 3 roommates in that semester. ... I was moved upstairs and then back downstairs.” A male non-returning student remarked, “I just ending up having a bad roommate. It wasn’t ya’ll’s fault, but he was a year older and we had completely different personalities.”

The students in the Fall 2005 non-enrolled group expressed concern about a lack of discipline and order in their residence halls. One female student noted: “I went into it thinking I was going to make a lot of friends. In Colby, it was very loud and a bigger party atmosphere than I would have expected going into a Christian college—the RAs couldn’t control it. It was so bad, I moved back home.” A male student expressed disappointment in his residence hall experience saying “I lived in Milton Daniel and wasn’t expecting to have 15 fire drills in the first semester. I wasn’t expecting someone to try to set my door on fire. I thought people would have more respect. I thought people would respect stuff—people would tear up stuff and steal stuff. It was not what I expected.” Another student noted, “I was in Moncrief. The cleaning staff was hard. My RA didn’t enforce rules. There was pot smoking, drinking, my room got broken into, and there was no security, (hardly any).”

In regard to academic advising, non-returning Spring 2005 students said that they had problems with their advisor or found that there was a lack of advising in general. One student noted, “When I got advised, my advisor didn’t really [advise], he just looked at my classes and said they were okay. He didn’t really point me in any direction. I expected him to have more involvement and I wanted more direction.” Another student said, “Academic advising during orientation was little to none, pretty much me randomly picking classes.”

The Fall 2005 non-enrolled students also mentioned academic advising as an area where their experiences did not match their expectations. The students expected someone to guide them through the whole academic process. One non-enrolled student said of the advising experience, “My expectations were that there would be a little more advising and more interaction throughout the semester. I got very brief advising and the advisors were not very experienced or knowledgeable about advising.” Another noted, “There was no academic advising at all, ..., no advising, no help, no nothing. Nothing.”

The comments of the returning students in regard to advising were similar to those of the non-returning students. One returning student said about advising, “I thought I would get more feedback with what I needed to take. I didn’t get as much as I thought.” Another returning student said, “I was expecting useful information and guidance—advice on how to go about planning an academic career. I felt I didn’t get any really useful information.”

Non-returning and non-enrolled students also noted more often than returning students that their expectations about student interactions outside of class and the

campus environment were not matched by their experiences. Non-returning students commented on how Greek the campus seemed, that there was no place to hang out, and they felt isolated or like they did not fit in. Student comments on this topic reflected a sense of separation and isolation. "My expectations were that on paper TCU is a great school, you don't have to be in a sorority to get along with everyone. I think that is a misconception." Another student said, "I didn't realize how much of an impact the fraternities and sororities had on social circles. I didn't really know anyone coming in and just felt really out of the loop because I wasn't in a fraternity." A student from Fort Worth noted, "In terms of students, I was hoping they would be a lot nicer and maybe more like me. I only found small handfuls of kids I got along with. Most of the kids were pretty judgmental." One student noted, "I was told during Monday at TCU and tour, if we weren't in a sorority, it won't matter, but that was all there was. On campus it was all Greek----it was overwhelming to both me and my roommates who weren't in sororities, that we weren't part of it." Another said, "They promote the whole Frog Camp thing and orientation but the Greek life is really huge. If I knew, I wouldn't have applied to TCU at all. It makes a huge difference with how one is treated. If you are not Greek, they cut you off. No one really spoke to me everywhere. It's not an uplifting environment as they present it to be. Even the Christian sororities are pretty bad and don't involve others." Other students felt that the student body wasn't diverse enough. The perception that TCU was very Greek and lacked diversity led some students to feel that they just "didn't fit in."

#### Reasons for Returning/Not Returning to TCU

To help us comprehend the link between expectations and re-enrollment decisions we asked, "What are the top reasons why TCU first-year students return or do not return for a second semester or year?" Returning Spring 2005 students were asked to give one or two factors that led to their return to TCU for the Spring semester. In these open-ended responses, students most often mentioned that they returned because they liked the people and the campus environment. Returning students also frequently said that they returned because of the academics and the professors. Several mentioned that they liked the smaller classes that TCU offers compared to some other universities and a number mentioned that they liked Fort Worth as well. Non-returning Spring 2005 students were asked to state one or two factors that contributed to their decision not to return to TCU for the Spring semester. The most common response had to do with an inability to make connections with others, followed by the cost of attending TCU, and personal reasons. A handful of students said that TCU was just too far from home while a few non-returning students said that TCU was not far enough from home! Five of the students in the non-returning group viewed their absence from TCU as temporary and planned to return to TCU for the Fall 2005 semester. Four of these students said the absence was due to personal reasons and the fifth student was studying abroad for the spring semester. Students in the Fall 2005 non-enrolled group most frequently cited increased tuition costs and finances as the primary reasons they did not plan to return to TCU in the fall followed by social reasons.

#### Where They Went/Plan to Go

In order to better understand the alternatives that students were considering when making an enrollment decision about TCU, non-returning Spring 2005 students were asked if they were currently enrolled elsewhere. Student self-reports were augmented by data obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Together the student

self-reports and NSC data provided transfer information for two-thirds of the students who did not return to TCU for the Spring 2005 semester. See Appendix B for a complete list of transfer schools. There were two trends evident among those students who indicated that they were currently enrolled elsewhere. First, of those students who were out-of-state, all but 4 who transferred, transferred to a school in their home state. Second, of the Texas students who transferred, most went to a public school within the state. Five Texas students transferred to a private university within Texas, one transferred to a private university outside of Texas and one transferred to a public university outside Texas. The remaining Texas students transferred to a public community college or university in Texas with the most transfers being reported to the University of North Texas in Denton followed by the University of Texas at Arlington.

Students not yet enrolled for Fall 2005 were asked if they intended to enroll anywhere for Fall 2005 and if so, where. Six of those students hoped to return to TCU. Four students indicated that they planned to enroll at UT Austin while two students each said that they planned to enroll at Texas A&M and UTA. Out-of-state, non-enrolled students were most likely to report that they planned to enroll at a college or university in their home state, while most Texas students reported that they planned to enroll at a public college or university in Texas. The notable exceptions here were four students who planned to enroll at the Air Force Academy, Howard University, the University of Toledo, and Trinity University respectively. See Appendix C for a complete list of schools where those students not yet enrolled for Fall 2005 plan to enroll this fall.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with earlier research that has found a link between the match between expectations and experiences and retention. Although there were no differences among the groups in regard to how well academic expectations were met by experiences, there were differences among the groups regarding how well social expectations were met by experiences with returning students reporting a higher degree of match than non-returning and non-enrolled students. These findings are similar to those of a study conducted at Vanderbilt, a highly selective, southern, private university (Helland et al. 2001-2002). In this study, Helland et al. (2001-2002) found that the fulfillment of academic expectations was not statistically significant in regard to persistence, but that the fulfillment of social expectations had a positive effect on subsequent institutional commitment and consequently persistence.

### Academic Expectations and Integration

The relatively low scores among all students on both the Academic Expectations Match scale and the Social Expectations Match scale (68.33 and 71.76 respectively) suggests that there is some disconnect between what students expect and what they actually experience when they arrive at TCU. For all students, the match between academic expectations and experiences was 68.33 on a scale of 100 with 100 being an excellent match suggesting that both returning and non-returning students experienced some disappointment with their academic experiences relative to their expectations. One possible explanation for the lower levels of match between academic expectations and experiences may be in the area of academic advising. This area received the lowest ratings across the board from all three groups and was one of the topics most often mentioned when students were asked to elaborate on areas where their experiences did not match their expectations. Both returning and non-returning students

who discussed advising often expressed disappointment with the amount of guidance they received and said they wanted more. Prior research has shown that academic advising plays a key role in the retention process (Beal and Noel 1980; Braxton and Mundy 2001-2002; Forrest 1982; Kapraun and Coldren 1982; Kinnick and Ricks 1993). These findings suggest that strategic efforts to improve retention at TCU might work toward improving the match between what entering students expect and experience in regard to academic advising.

Despite the relatively low match between academic expectations and experiences for all groups, objective data obtained from student records suggests that students who returned for subsequent semesters achieved better academic integration at TCU than those who did not return. The non-returning/non-enrolled students were three times as likely as returning students to have had a cumulative GPA of 1.5 or less (22.0% compared to 6.9%). The difference in GPA between the students who returned and those who did not was statistically significant. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. GPA by Return/Enrollment Status

GPA	Non-Returning/Non-Enrolled (n=218)	Returning (n=102)
≤1.5	22.0%	6.9%
1.6-2.5	24.3%	16.7%
2.6-4.0	53.7%	76.5%

( $\Theta=.248$ ,  $X^2(2)=17.071$ ,  $p<.001$ )

### Social Expectations and Integration

The finding that students who did not return for the Spring 2005 semester or enroll for the Fall 2005 semester experienced more incongruence between social expectations and social experiences is consistent with earlier research that has demonstrated a connection between the fulfillment of expectations, social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and retention. Helland et al. (2001-2002) suggest that students appear to evaluate their early social experiences and then decide whether they want to make the effort to fit in. "If a student feels disappointed with the social communities of his/her college or university, then he or she is less likely to expend the psychological energy needed to become socially integrated (Helland et al. 2001-2002: 393-94)." This process might explain, to some extent, the differences in the Social Expectations Match scores for the returning and non-returning students and their subsequent re-enrollment decisions.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) suggest that there is a compensatory relationship between academic and social integration. They found that academic integration had the strongest positive influence on persistence at the relatively lowest levels of social integration and vice versa. The compensatory relationship between academic and social integration and retention might be thought of as illustrated in Table 2 below. This theory may provide some insight into why students whose social expectations were met at higher levels persisted at TCU even when their academic expectations were not met as well. Given the relationship between expectation fulfillment and academic and social integration, if students experience a low match between social expectations and experiences and a low match between academic expectations and experiences then academic integration is not able to function in a compensatory fashion to increase persistence. On the other hand, for students whose social expectations were met at higher levels, social integration does seem to behave in a compensatory fashion,

balancing the relatively lower levels of the match between academic expectations and experiences, and increasing persistence.

Table 2. Compensatory Relationship Between Academic and Social Integration and Attrition

Academic Integration	Social Integration	
	High	Low
High	Low Risk of Attrition	Moderate Risk of Attrition; Level of Risk Mediated by Level of Academic Integration
Low	Moderate Risk of Attrition; Level of Risk Mediated by Level of Social Integration	High Risk of Attrition

Since the AE scores for both returners and non-returners were low, it might appear that this variable does not discriminate between the two groups. However, there is an opportunity to consider what would occur if these scores were raised. Would the differences between the groups on the social integration scale remain the same if the AE scores were raised? The compensatory relationship discussed by Pascarella and Terenzini posits that if academic integration was more successful, then the need for social integration would not be as great. Thus, the importance of the academic classroom is highlighted by these findings. Faculty should be providing opportunities for students to more fully engage with academic departments, disciplinary colleagues, and other students within the discipline. By enhancing student engagement with content, peers, and faculty, students will be more thoroughly integrated into the institution. Interestingly, this academic integration may also enhance the social integration through collegial relationships with others.

Given the lower levels of academic integration experienced by first-year students, social expectation fulfillment and integration appear to be key factors in the retention process at TCU. The reasons that students gave for not returning to TCU mirror those found in the literature with social isolation and cost topping the lists. The non-returning students seemed to be most disappointed in their inability to form relationships with other students in and out of the classroom. Students who did not return to TCU for the Spring 2005 semester and those who are not enrolled for the Fall 2005 semester shared the perception that TCU is an overwhelmingly Greek campus and this perception contributed to a sense of social isolation among non-returning students. The perception of TCU as an overwhelmingly Greek campus raises the question, "How Greek is TCU"? A comparison of the proportion of TCU students involved in fraternities and sororities with peer and aspirant schools suggests that TCU is somewhere in the middle of the pack in terms of its Greek population. TCU has a higher proportion of students involved in fraternities and sororities than some schools, but not as high as others. See Table 3 below. However, TCU does have a much higher proportion of students in fraternities and sororities than the schools in Texas to which students transfer most often (see Table 4.)

The proportion of the student body which is Greek at TCU may not be as important as the perceived lack of substantial campus social opportunities for non-Greek students, a topic often raised in conjunction with the Greek nature of the campus. The perceived lack of campus social opportunities for non-Greek students may contribute to the perception that the TCU undergraduate student population is much more Greek than it really is and the feeling that one must be a part of the Greek system in order to be a part

of the social life of the campus. When asked the general question of what TCU might do to improve, the second most common suggestion given by students had to do with presenting a more realistic impression of the role of Greek life at TCU during the recruitment and orientation process, followed by the suggestion that there be more campus activities for students, especially those not involved in the Greek system. Elevating the visibility of non-Greek campus social opportunities may be a first step toward addressing these student concerns.

Table 3. Proportion of Undergraduate Student Population in Fraternities and Sororities at TCU Peer and Aspirant Schools

<b>School</b>	<b>Fraternities</b>	<b>Sororities</b>
<b>TCU</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>38%</b>
Baylor	13%	17%
Duke	NA	NA
Emory	27%	26%
Lehigh	33%	43%
Marquette	6%	8%
Northwestern	30%	39%
Pepperdine	24%	29%
Rice	0%	0%
SMU	34%	47%
Tulane	33%	37%
Notre Dame	0%	0%
Vanderbilt	34%	50%
Wake Forest	31%	53%

Source: U.S. News and World Report, America's Best Colleges 2005

Table 4. Proportion of Undergraduate Student Population in Fraternities and Sororities at Texas Schools to Which TCU Students Most Often Transfer

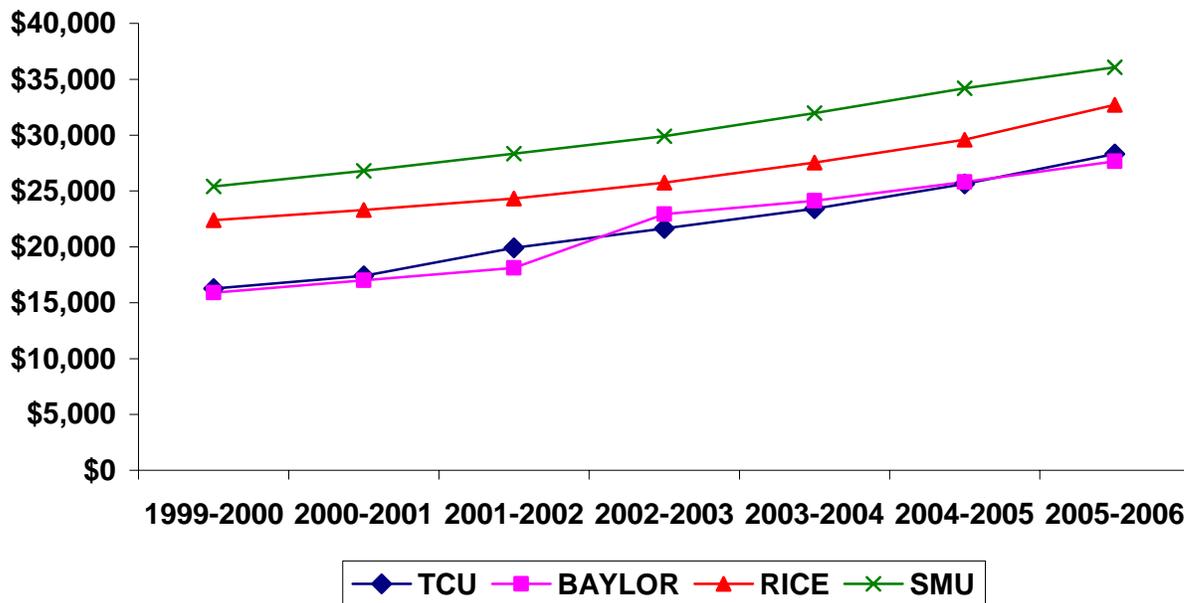
<b>School</b>	<b>Fraternities</b>	<b>Sororities</b>
UT Austin	9%	14%
Texas A&M	4%	7%
UTA	5%	4%
UNT	2%	2%

Source: U.S. News and World Report, America's Best Colleges 2005

St. John et al. (1996) suggest that students engage, to some extent, in a cost-benefit analysis when making re-enrollment decisions. The present findings suggest that students who are disappointed in their social experiences at TCU may be more likely to conclude that TCU is not worth the cost and withdraw than students who are more satisfied with their social experiences. Indeed, cost was an oft-cited factor for not returning to the University. One student even noted "I just didn't want my parents to waste the money if I wasn't getting that much out of it." The subsequent enrollment decisions of students who left TCU imply that cost is a factor in the departure decisions along with an inability for some, especially out-of-state students, to achieve adequate social integration into the TCU community. A majority of the students who did not return to TCU for the Spring semester or enroll for the Fall 2005 semester attended or plan to attend public, in-state colleges or universities.

The average annual cost of attending TCU has increased 58% from 1999 to 2005, an average increase of about 11% a year. This rate of increase is consistent with the increased costs of attending Baylor, Rice, and SMU. See Figure 8 below.

Figure 8. Average Annual Cost of Attending TCU, Baylor, Rice and SMU 1999 - 2005



When asked how TCU might improve, the most frequently noted response had to do with the cost of attending TCU. Students recommended that TCU lower its tuition or increase scholarships and grants. Most of the comments reflected the sentiment expressed succinctly by this student, "I really don't know of anything TCU could have done, unless they lower their tuition or give more money." In some cases, more proactive and assertive measures to help students work through financial problems may be enough to encourage the student to return. One student noted, "I couldn't register for classes because I had an \$800 hold on my account and I couldn't do anything unless I paid it. I needed more of an opportunity to make up that money because I definitely wouldn't have left. She told me basically pay the money or you can't be here anymore."

### CONCLUSION

The decision of where to attend college is one of the most important decisions of a young adult's life and often the result of much deliberation. As some students in this study noted, there will always be a small group of students for whom the first college attended is just not the right fit and there is nothing that the University can do when they decide to leave but wish them well. For others, though, there may be changes or adjustments that can be made in the recruitment process or first-year experience that will allow students to find a better match between expectations and experiences and to achieve better social and academic integration which in turn will enhance institutional and goal commitment and retention. "Truth in advertising" is critical to the development of realistic expectations and realistic expectations are the first step to improving the match between college expectations and experiences.

While the primary differences in this study between the students who returned and those who did not return were in the area of how well social experiences matched expectations, the even lower match between academic expectations and experiences among all groups warrants further exploration as well. If academic and social integration do operate in the compensatory manner suggested by Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) then improvements in the match between academic experiences and expectations could potentially increase the retention of students experiencing difficulty with social integration in the first year.

There are several limitations to this study which must be taken into consideration before attempting to generalize the findings to TCU freshmen as a whole. First, the sample size is relatively small and is to a great extent a convenience sample. The students who did not return for the Spring 2005 semester or enroll for the Fall 2005 semester were essentially self-selected. In an effort to minimize differences between the non-returning sample and a random sample of returning students, the random sample of returning students was drawn from a population stratified along the same college, gender, and ethnicity proportions as the non-returning sample. This process eliminated some sub-groups from the possibility of participation in the study. Another element of convenience in this study is that only those who could be contacted by telephone were interviewed. Although there were no significant differences among the groups between those contacted and those not contacted and those who completed the interview or those who declined, caution still should be taken not to generalize the findings of this study beyond the sample.

Despite these limitations, the findings do suggest that there may be real differences between the students who return and those who do not return regarding how well their first year social experiences match their expectations. They also imply that there is some real disappointment among all students regarding how well their academic experiences match their expectations. Since the fulfillment of social and academic expectations influences social and academic integration which in turn affects student retention, this topic warrants further study in order to identify specific areas that may benefit from program or policy changes. Program or policy changes grounded in real data stand a better chance of improving the potential for a match between student experiences and expectations, resulting in better social and academic integration, and ultimately persistence to graduation.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

**All students were asked to rate the match between their expectations and experiences using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 was NO Match and 5 an EXCELLENT Match.**

Level of Academic Challenge  
 Student-Faculty Interaction IN the classroom  
 Student-Faculty Interaction OUTSIDE the classroom  
 Academic Advising  
 Interactions with other students IN the classroom  
 Interactions with other students OUTSIDE the classroom  
 Interactions with non-faculty TCU staff  
 Campus Environment (i.e..friendly, caring, etc.)  
 Experiences in your residence hall  
 Campus Social Opportunities

**Follow-up question if a student rated any of the above areas as a match of less than 3**

Please give one example of what your expectations were and what your experience was at TCU.

**Additional questions asked of all students**

Did you participate in RUSH?

If yes, how well, on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being no match at all and 5 being a perfect match, did your expectations match your experience?

**Follow-up question if a student rated the Rush experience as a match of less than 3**

Please give one example of what their expectations were in regard to Rush at TCU and what their experience was at TCU.

Did you have a class that you particularly LIKED last semester?

If yes, what did you like about it?

Did you have a class that you particularly DISLIKED last semester?

If yes, what did you dislike about it?

Were you involved in any co-curricular activities or organizations last semester?

If yes, what activities or organizations were you involved in?

**Question asked of Returning Students only.**

Please tell us the top one or two factors that contributed to your decision to return to TCU for the Spring semester.

**Questions asked of Non-returning students only.**

Please tell us the top one or two factors that contributed to your decision NOT to return to TCU for the Spring semester.

What, if anything, could TCU have improved that might have encouraged you to stay at TCU?

Are you currently enrolled elsewhere?  
If yes, where are you enrolled?

**Questions asked of Fall 2005 non-enrolled students only.**

Please tell us the top one or two factors that contributed to your decision NOT to enroll at TCU for the Fall 2005 semester.

Is there anything that TCU could do to help facilitate your return for the Fall 2005 semester? If respondent answered yes, the interviewer asked if they would grant permission to give their name and contact information to the appropriate TCU office for follow-up.

**Questions asked of Spring 2005 non-returning students and Fall 2005 non-enrolled students.**

Do you plan to enroll anywhere for the Fall 2005 semester?  
If yes, where do you plan to enroll?

## APPENDIX B

Table 5. College or University attended Spring 2005 by TCU Fall 2004 Freshmen

<b>COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY</b>	<b>Self-Reported Transfers*</b>	<b>NSC Transfers</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>ALABAMA</b>			
Southern Union State Community College (AL)	[1]	1	1
<b>ARKANSAS</b>			
University of Arkansas—Fayetteville	1	na	1
University of Arkansas—Little Rock	na	1	1
<b>ARIZONA</b>			
Arizona State University	[2]	2	2
University of Arizona	1	na	1
<b>CALIFORNIA</b>			
Orange Coast College (CA)	na	1	1
Pepperdine University	na	1	1
<b>COLORADO</b>			
Colorado State University	[1]	1	1
Regis University	[1]	1	1
University of Colorado at Boulder	na	1	1
University of Denver	[1]	1	1
<b>IOWA</b>			
University of Iowa	na	1	1
University of Northern Iowa	na	1	1
<b>ILLINOIS</b>			
Black Hawk College (IL)	na	1	1
<b>KANSAS</b>			
Johnson County Community College (Kansas)	[1]	1	1
University of Kansas	1	na	1
<b>LOUISIANA</b>			
Tulane University	[1]	1	1
<b>MASSACHUSETTS</b>			
Massachusetts Bay Community College	na	1	1
<b>NEBRASKA</b>			
University of Nebraska—Lincoln	[1]	2	2
<b>OHIO</b>			
Ashland University (Ohio)	[1]	1	1

\* [ ] indicates a self-reported transfer also identified by NSC data.

Table 5. Continued

<b>COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY</b>	<b>Self-Reported Transfers</b>	<b>NSC Transfers</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>OKLAHOMA</b>			
Oklahoma State University—Stillwater	na	1	1
University of Central Oklahoma	na	1	1
University of Oklahoma	1	na	1
<b>PENNSYLVANIA</b>			
Pennsylvania State University	na	1	1
<b>TENNESSEE</b>			
University of Tennessee—Chattanooga	na	1	1
<b>TEXAS</b>			
Angelo State University	na	1	1
Austin Community College	[1]	3	3
Baylor University	[1]	2	2
Blinn College	[2]	4	4
Grayson County College	na	1	1
Hill College (Cleburne)	1	na	1
Kilgore College	na	1	1
LeTourneau University	na	1	1
McMurry University	na	1	1
North Lake College—Dallas CC District	na	1	1
Southern Methodist University	[1]	1	1
Tarleton State University	na	1	1
Tarrant County College	2	na	2
Texas A&M	[1]*	0	0
Texas State University-San Marcos	na	1	1
Texas Tech University	na	2	2
University of North Texas	5	na	5
University of Texas at Arlington	[2]	4	4
University of Texas at San Antonio	[1]	1	1
University of Houston	na	2	2
University of Texas at Dallas	na	1	1
University of Texas—Permian Basin	na	1	1
Weatherford College	na	1	1
Wharton County Junior College	na	1	1
<b>OTHER</b>			
University in Japan	1	na	1
<b>TOTAL (columns only)</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>67</b>

\*Student self-reported Texas A&M, but NSC result showed Blinn College.

## APPENDIX C

Table 6. Intent to Transfer as Reported by Fall 2005 Non-Enrolled Students

<b>COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY</b>	<b>Number Expressing Intent to Transfer</b>
<b>ARKANSAS</b>	
University of Arkansas—Little Rock	1
<b>ARIZONA</b>	
Northern Arizona University	1
<b>CALIFORNIA</b>	
Mera Costa Community College	1
<b>COLORADO</b>	
Air Force Academy	1
<b>GEORGIA</b>	
Gainesville College	1
<b>ILLINOIS</b>	
McHenry Community College	1
<b>KANSAS</b>	
University of Kansas	1
Washburn University	1
<b>MONTANA</b>	
Montana State University	1
<b>NEBRASKA</b>	
University of Nebraska – Lincoln	1
<b>NEVADA</b>	
University of Nevada – Reno	1
<b>OHIO</b>	
University of Toledo	1
<b>TENNESSEE</b>	
University of Tennessee	1
<b>TEXAS</b>	
Collin County Community College	1
Sam Houston State	1
St. Edwards or Tarleton State	1
TCU or Texas A&M	1
Texas A&M	2
Texas State	1
Texas Tech	1
Trinity University	1
University of Houston	1
UNT	1
UT– Austin	4
UTA	2
<b>WASHINGTON, DC</b>	
Howard University	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>28</b>