Student Dropout in Higher Education in Southern Mexico: A Qualitative Approach (2011-2020)

La Deserción Escolar en la Educación Superior en el Sureste Mexicano: Una Mirada Cualitativa (2011-2020)

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Abstract:
Student dropout is a problem that cuts across several disciplines, educational levels, and contexts. More than 40% of students who enroll in higher education in Latin America do not complete their program (Fonseca & García, 2016). Several organizations evaluating educational programs in Mexico have urged universities to reduce student dropout rates. However, accomplishing this goal requires identifying its causes. Previous research suggests students abandon their studies for numerous reasons, including psychological, socio-environmental, economic, organizational, and interactional factors (Tinto, 1987); and economic, administrative, academic, and affective factors (Authors, 2012). This paper reports on the findings obtained from a qualitative exploratory case study conducted at a university located in the southeastern region of Mexico. The main goal was to explore the causes for which students abandoned their studies in higher education. Data were collected from 118 participants from undergraduate and graduate programs across five campuses and seven colleges using an electronic survey. Findings suggest that three main types of causes influenced students' decision to drop out of their program, namely academic, personal, and economic reasons. Results also demonstrate the complexity and multi-factorial reasons for early leaving. This paper offers suggestions for strategic university-wide decisions for student support program design.
Keywords: Student dropout; Early leaving; Higher education.

Resumen:
La deserción escolar es una problemática presente en diversas disciplinas, niveles y contextos educativos. Más del 40% del alumnado que ingresa a la educación superior en América Latina no finaliza sus estudios según un estudio por Fonseca y García, (2016). En México, diversas organizaciones que evalúan programas educativos señalan la urgente necesidad de reducir el abandono escolar; para lo cual se requiere identificar las causas de deserción. Estudios previos sugieren que el alumnado abandona sus estudios debido a diversas razones, entre ellos, factores psicológicos, socio-ambientales, económicos, organizacionales e interaccionales (Tinto, 1987); y factores económicos, administrativos, académicos y afectivos (Autores, 2012). Este artículo reporta los hallazgos obtenidos en un estudio de caso cualitativo, cuyo objetivo fue explorar las causas de deserción escolar en una universidad ubicada en la región sureste de México. Se recolectaron datos mediante una encuesta electrónica aplicada a 118 participantes que desertaron de programas educativos de licenciatura y posgrado, en cinco campus y siete divisiones académicas. Los resultados sugieren que el alumnado abandona sus estudios por tres principales causas: académicas, personales, y económicas. Los resultados también demuestran que la deserción es compleja y multi-factorial. Este artículo también ofrece recomendaciones para la toma de decisiones y diseño de programas de apoyo a estudiantes en educación superior.
Palabras clave: Deserción; Abandono escolar; Educación superior.

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| Introduction

 The phenomenon of school dropout is a problem that occurs in different disciplines, levels, and educational contexts. The National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES, 2014) in México has stressed that student dropout is one of the most enduring challenges worldwide and that educational policies need to be revised, paying particular attention to who has access to higher education, how more efficient courses and programs can be offered, and how relevant education is, enabling more equity for people -especially in developing countries.

Moreno (2017) suggests that school dropout in Mexico is the most pressing concern in compulsory education. The National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE, 2016, 2019) pointed out that the national average dropout rate in the 2016-2017 school year was 1.1% for primary, 5.3% for secondary school, and 15.2% for high school. ANUIES (2016) has suggested that dropout at the upper secondary level is perceived as an increasing problem, attributing as possible causes of the apathy of young people towards studying, unwanted pregnancies, or the impossibility of continuing their education due to a shortage of economic resources.

In the field of higher education, there are similar problems in terms of school dropout. According to Fonseca and García (2016), indicators from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) suggest that more than 40% of university students in Latin America, including Mexico, do not complete their studies. Likewise, various evaluation and accreditation agencies, such as the Inter-institutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CIEES) and the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education (COPAES) all Mexican, have stressed the urgency of reducing dropout rates and increasing student retention. For this to be possible, it is first necessary to know why students drop out.

School dropout can be conceived and studied in different ways. Fonseca and García (2016) point out that the term permanence is linked to school retention and refers to participating in or completing a study program. However, dropout is multifaceted and challenging to define. The most common conception refers to school dropout from a negative perspective, referring to it as the end of the relationship between the student and a program leading to a degree (Fonseca & García, 2016). However, the same academics also explain that dropping out of school can be perceived positively in some cases as a decision of the students to seek better academic preparation or success in an educational project (Fonseca & García, 2016); for example leaving a certain program of studies to pursue a different one more ad-hoc to their interests may lead them to succeed in achieving the goals of that new choice of study. Tinto (1987), a well-known scholar in the field of early leaving, provided a second conceptualization. He defined student dropout as a) students who abandon their studies definitively, dropping out of all higher education modalities; b) students who abandon their studies in one Higher Education Institution (HEI) to transfer to another; and c) students who irrevocably drop out of the career they are studying. For this study, we will use the term ´students` to refer to those who have dropped out of an Educational Program (EP), as in the cases mentioned by Tinto. In this sense, early leaving considers the following: (1) Students who permanently withdraw from a program of study; (2) Students who voluntarily leave

their educational program; and to pursue a different one at another institution; (3) Students who leave their educational program to pursue a different career within the same institution.

Several research studies have been conducted at the university level in Mexico to discover why students drop out. In 1987, Tinto proposed five theories that encompass the possible causes of dropout: psychological, social-environmental, economic, organizational, and interactional. Likewise, the Ministry of Public Education in Mexico SEP has pointed out possible causes of dropout: a) low-grade point averages in high school, b) marital status (how being married could trigger dropout), and c) the need to work simultaneously to study. A study conducted by Hernández and Narváez (2014) at the University of Veracruz (UV) pointed out as causes that influence school dropout: when the place of origin is far from the university, family problems, lack of economic resources, inadequate space to study, the need to work while studying, health problems or addictions, lack of basic skills before entering the university, the high level of demand from professors, and wrong choice of career. In a mixed methods study conducted by Dzay and Narváez (2012), at the Autonomous University of Quintana Roo (UQROO), between 2002 and 2011, the dropout rate increased from 4 to 13%. The results of the qualitative analysis (Dzay & Narváez, 2012) indicated that the reasons that led students to abandon their educational programs could be grouped into economic, administrative, academic, and emotional causes.

Several scholars claim that early leaving is a multi-causal phenomenon because many factors intervene (Aldaco-Linares & Carpio-Hernández, 2017; Olivares, 2019; Smulders, 2018). Some of these causes point to students' behavior and household environment as crucial agents in their decision to continue schooling. Other studies from different latitudes point to institutions' teaching and learning processes (Archambault et al., 2009; Torres,

Acevedo, & Gallo, 2015). Therefore, diverse factors can influence the decision of students to abandon their studies. Olivares (2019) states that the problem of school dropout cannot be handled through its consequences but its causes. Olivares also acknowledges that early leaving originates from multiple reasons, including those related to students' personality traits and weaknesses; that is, some students realize at some point throughout their studies that the programs they were enrolled were not what they expected or implied they could not cope with it due to personality aspects, dislikes, phobias, skills, or simply a lack of `match` of the potential careers and their personalities. However, there are also situations where students are forced to abandon their studies against their will. Other authors, such as Smulders (2018) and Aldaco-Linares and Carpio-Hernández (2017), build on the internal and external factors that intervene when deciding to drop out of school. Among the most stressed internal factors found are the poor selection of their major, unfulfilled expectations, lack of vocational guidance, and repetition of courses (Smulders, 2018). Regarding the external factors, students' socioeconomic status remains the most influential element due to its relation to students' permanence in the institution.

The previous studies provide an overview of the complexity and multidimensionality of the dropout phenomenon. They also put forward some proposals for the solution. However, several of these studies were conducted over ten years ago, pointing to the necessity to identify how early leaving has changed in the past few years and if the strategies developed by higher educational institutions have helped solve the problem. The study this paper reports on provides a current view of the causes for which students drop out of their academic programs at a public university in southeastern Mexico and proposes recommendations for decision-making.

| Method

In this section, we will briefly describe the research methodology used in the study, including the purpose, the research design, the participants, the procedures followed for data collection and analysis, and the measures to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

The objective of this study was to identify the reasons why students drop out of their studies at a public university in southeastern Mexico. Aligned with the purpose, the question that guided the study is the following: Why do students drop out of their academic program in higher education? To answer the question, a qualitative exploratory case study was conducted at a university located in the southeastern region of Mexico. An electronic survey (Appendix 1) that included open-ended and closed-ended questions was sent out to the entire population of students who dropped out of their program between the years 2011 and 2020 (N=5,257 cases). A total of 116 responses through email and text messages were received, which formed the sample of participants for this study.

For the data analysis, some of the principles of grounded theory were followed. As grounded theory is designed to develop an approach to social phenomena based on collecting data in a study and school dropout is a social problem centered on students' diverse problems, it was considered the most suitable framework to define and understand this phenomenon. Merriam (2009) explains that grounded theory can be used for data reduction, starting with the open-coding, axial coding, and category construction; thus, for the purposes of this study, all these data analysis procedures were considered. Regarding software, MAXQDA Pro 10 was used to analyze the data gathered. According to Merriam (2009), the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) can facilitate analysis and the organization of data used for qualitative research.

To ensure validity and reliability, several strategies were used. First, clear and precise definitions were established to delimit the universe of the population; second, various sampling techniques were used (i.e., randomization, purposive, criterion rubrics, universal population); third, triangulation by members was used, as data were analyzed and compared by different members of the research team. Investigation triangulation occurs when multiple investigators collect and analyze data (Merriam, 2009). Turner and Turner (2009) described investigator triangulation as instances used in qualitative methods, mainly where data coding is required. This triangulation confirms the nature and shows the reliability of coding rather than challenging conclusions. For this report, data collected from open-ended items were analyzed. In addition, the participants' privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality were ensured at all times (Cohen et al., 2018). The participants were informed that the data would be used only for research purposes, including publications resulting from this project.

| Findings

The research question that guided this study was 'Why do students in a university located in the southeastern region of Mexico drop out of their study program? A qualitative exploratory case study design (Merriam, 2009) was used to explore the causes for which students abandoned their studies in higher education. Data were collected from 118 participants who had dropped out of undergraduate and graduate programs across five campuses and seven colleges, using a survey that included closed- and open-ended questions. Once the data was collected and subsequently scrutinized, the three most salient topics became the three main categories of causes, namely academic, personal, and economic causes. Findings also demonstrate the complexity and multifactorial reasons influencing students' decision to abandon their educational programs. This section provides insight into each one of these types of causes.

Academic causes

The results suggest that academic causes surfaced as the main reason students drop out of school. Within this category, several codes emerged in a more refined way as data was analyzed repeatedly, and became grouped into the following themes: curriculum, teaching, and learning (Table 1). In this section, we briefly describe each of these groupings, interweaving the participants' voices.

Table 1
Academic causes.

Category	Axial codes	Initial codes	Number of codes
Academic causes	Curriculum	Misinformation regarding the curriculum	5
		Management of educational programs	16
		Low possibilities of success	1
		Lack of support from educational authorities	14
		Lack of interest in the program	22
	Teaching	Limited resources	2
		Lack of teacher empathy and understanding	14
	Learning	Academic difficulty	12
		Lack of commitment	3
		Academic failure and underachievement	9

In terms of the curriculum, the most frequent causes reported by participants include those related to the program of study (i.e., misinformation, low possibilities of success, and lack of interest in the program) and the administration or management of the program of study (i.e., inflexible schedules, lack of support from educators and authorities). Regarding the academics of the program of study, participants highlighted the importance of building a closer connection between university-society. For example, Participant #13 mentioned, "There were no opportunities for practicing, and there were no real employment opportunities. Few agreements with other schools. Little experience in the university" (Translated from the original in Spanish). The misinformation and lack of interest in the program also influenced their decision when it did not meet their expectations. For instance, Participant #74 stated, "The curriculum was filled with unnecessary courses that, instead of contributing to your major, they took away time and generated stress" (Translated from the original in Spanish). A final remark demonstrates how the curriculum did not meet the students' expectations:

> The program was not what I expected, nor did I feel it was for me. It is a major that I liked, and it was hard for me to decide to drop out; however, I didn't feel it went with me or what I liked, nor did it develop the skills I wanted to have. Besides, I was aware of the burden it took to study that major and I wasn't willing to make certain sacrifices when it didn't fulfill my expectations. (Participant #100, Translated from the original in Spanish)

Regarding the program administration, one of the most frequent causes that emerged from participants' voices was the lack of flexibility in class schedules. Participants felt that the hours in which courses were programmed

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prevented them from being able to work and complete other activities besides schooling. For instance, Participant #34 commented, "The University is not flexible with its schedules… the times of my classes and the heavy workload did not allow me to work and study concurrently" (Translated from the original in Spanish). A similar observation was made by Participant #16, who claimed that "In the morning, I studied, and, in the afternoon, I went to work; however, the frequent changes in course schedules would conflict with my work schedule, and that's why I decided to drop out" (Translated from the original in Spanish).

Pedagogical factors also influenced participants' decisions to drop out of their studies. In some cases, students described the "few hours of classes, there was a lack of feedback, I felt I wasn't progressing, and it wasn't worth being away from my family if my learning expectations weren't being fulfilled" (Participant #87, Translated from the original in Spanish). Other students described some teachers as being non-empathetic and discouraging. For instance, Participant #53 said, "Instead of motivating us, teachers would constantly tell us how difficult the major was and that we weren't attending class; they never encouraged me to try harder and to get through my problems to be successful…they said I didn't have what it took, and I should abandon the program" (Translated from the original in Spanish). A very concerning finding in this study was the perceived aggression some participants felt on behalf of the teacher in their classes. For example, a participant shared that "The teacher was not very professional; she would verbally denigrate and emotionally attack some people in her classes" (Participant #71, Translated from the original in Spanish). Another stated that "The teacher would not allow me to enter the class or submit my assignments because I had had an accident that put me in a wheelchair for a while" (Participant #110, Translated from the original in Spanish).

A third code that emerged within the participants' voices was the complexity of the academic courses in their major. Despite dedicating time and effort, some students felt they were not making progress. For instance, Participant #7 claimed that "Learning another language was something very hard for me, I studied weeks before the exam, and I still never achieved the grades I expected, or I would fail. That frustrated me, so I decided to change to another program" (Translated from the original in Spanish). Similar feelings were described by Participant #9, "I pressured myself too much, I didn't enjoy studying, the classes became more and more difficult," and Participant #80 who said, "Even though the major wasn't what I had expected, I tried my best, but I couldn't, so I gave up" (Translated from the original in Spanish).

Overall, the causes described by the participants in this section are all related to academic issues. Some of the critical factors highlighted by participants include the increasing need for flexible schedules, improving communication between faculty, students, and educational authorities, as well as offering academic support in those courses that have high failure rates. Another issue identified is students' perception of the lack of empathy and, to some degree, a perceived aggression on their teachers' behalf. A final finding in this study is the relationship between the different categorizations of academic causes. For instance, the lack of flexible schedules (management of educational programs) is interrelated with the lack of sensitivity to students' needs (lack of support from educational authorities). Because the causes described are heavily dependent on the university, we consider that implementing strategic programs university-wide could help improve the problems identified and prevent other students from dropping out of their studies. Some examples include the inclusion and development of "soft skills" as part of teacher training programs, (for example, the bachelor's program in English Language Teaching, or Humanities), establishing permanent communication channels between students and educators, improving the promotion of educational programs to ensure students

are familiarized with the major before registration, and offering tutoring programs for students in courses with high failure rates. These findings are consistent and enhance those of authors like Fonseca and García (2016) and Tinto (1987), which point out the different factors associated with academic causes; for example, when students voluntarily abandon their current educational programs to pursue a different career at the same or another academic institution, providing more insightful reasons for academic dropout.

Personal causes

Personal causes surfaced as the second reason why students drop out of their studies in higher education. Within this category, several codes emerged from the data and were grouped into the following themes: curriculum, teaching, and learning (Table 2). In this section, we briefly describe each one of these groupings, interweaving the participants' voices.

Table 2
Personal causes.

Category	Axial codes	Initial codes	Number of codes
Personal causes	Curriculum	New and different interests	8
		Stress/Emotional load	26
	Teaching		
	Learning	Conflicts within their family	10
		Health problems	7
		Maternity/Fatherhood	6
		Discrimination/Bullying	5
		Transportation and mobility	5
		Lack of time/Organizational skills	4
		Difficulty adapting	3
		Personal safety	1

Among the personal causes, we can identify that stress and emotional problems were the most frequent reasons students abandoned their studies. We can also see that this factor is interrelated between curriculum, teaching, and learning. For instance, Participant #98 stated, "It was very demanding for me, I had to spend nearly all day at school; sometimes, I didn't eat until nighttime, then I would arrive home and take a shower in cold water in cold weather. During the day, the homework load was too demanding, I started to get very stressed and had headaches every day" (Translated from the original in Spa-

nish). A similar concern was reported by Participant #74, who said that" The educational programs were filled with unnecessary courses, that instead of building your skills in the program, they filled your time up and generated stress at the end of the day" (Translated from the original in Spanish).

Other personal causes involved conflicts and situations that affected their academic studies. For instance, within the family conflicts code, Participant #82 described having gone through a divorce which led her to abandon her studies to start working and be able to support her

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child; within the code of health issues, some participants described their inability to cope with high levels of stress, which led them to physical problems. Other participants already had an ailment and couldn't maintain the high demands of their program because of surgeries and other health-related issues. Both the conflicts with their family and health issues impacted the participants' learning process and led them to abandon their studies.

Among the code "new and different interests," we find causes related to the change in students' perception regarding their major. Occasionally Sometimes, this decision was caused by external factors; for example, Participant #28 pursued an opportunity of employment in the United States and continued her studies in nursing abroad. In her words, the quality of life as a nurse in Mexico did not seem favorable because of the country's economy. The profession was not as highly respected in Mexico, in her experience, compared to the US, the reason why she decided to leave and study nursing outside of the country" (Translated from the original in Spanish). Other factors were internal and related to students' change in career choice. For instance, Participant #45, who was studying Economics, changed to a different program more related to Business and Management; and Participant #64 felt that "the program didn't fulfill my professional development aspirations; in other words, I did not see myself working in public security" (Translated from the original

in Spanish).

Similarly, Hernandez and Narváez's (2014) personal factors arouse as perhaps the most challenging to propose solutions because the causes cannot be directly attributed, nor do they depend solely or mainly on the institution. However, as a general recommendation, universities must develop institutional programs to help their students overcome the social and emotional difficulties they encounter during their academic studies. Dzay and Narváez (2012) identified similar causes as those reported in the herein study, in which personal factors were determinants for students' dropping out of university. In over ten years, the panorama does not seem to have changed, as participant's inability to manage stress was a recurrent cause in our study. Therefore, it would be essential to provide additional training to students during their first semesters, offering them techniques to manage stress and learn how to problem-solve, as well as creating funds to offer scholarships to students who are in financial difficulties.

Economic causes

A third category that emerged in the findings from this study corresponds to economic causes. Within this category, the initial codes were grouped into the following themes: change of residency and financial hardship (Table 3). In this section, we briefly describe each of these groupings, interweaving the participants' voices.

Table 3
Economic causes.

Category	Axial codes	Initial codes	Number of codes
Economic causes	Change of residency	Leave home to study	9
	Financial hardship	Work	17
		Additional expenses	2
		Lack of financial resources	38

Within 2011 and 2020, 167 students abandoned their studies and were categorized as originally from nearby towns or cities. In the present survey, this was mentioned by some participants who had to move or travel back and forth daily to the city where the campus was located. These trips generated substantial additional expenses for students. We can see this in the following voices: "Being a student who comes from another town, having to cover all the expenses that we incur" (Participant #12, Translated from the original in Spanish); and "I came from another city and did not have enough money to pay all the expenses that originated" (Participant #42, Translated from the original in Spanish).

A second economic cause is the financial hardship students encounter during their studies. The lack of economic resources forces students to work while studying, in most cases feeling obliged to abandon their studies because "I had to work because I wouldn't be able to continue studying without any money" (Participant #34, Translated from the original in Spanish). Students frequently reported being supported financially by family members; however, for some, this situation changed during their studies. For instance, Participant #73 described, "A cousin was helping me pay for schooling expenses; however, she couldn't continue helping me, so I went to find a job. It was so extenuating that I got to the point of a personal, emotional, and financial breakdown" (Translated from the original in Spanish).

Overall, the economic causes are closely related to both themes within this category. Students who came from other towns and cities were the ones who reported more financial hardships, which forced them to find employment, led to low academic achievement, and, finally, to their decision to abandon their studies. This finding demonstrates the need to establish multidimensional and holistic strategies to help students improve their academics and respond to their overall financial needs. Several scholars (Aldaco-Linares & Carpio-Hernández, 2017; Olivares, 2019; Smulders, 2018) have pointed out the importance of studying the ´external factor´ of school dropout.

Economic causes can be placed within this category, as the financial component cannot always be directly attributed to the student. As we observed, these causes are included among those influencing students' decision to abandon their studies.

| Conclusions

This paper reported on the results obtained from a qualitative exploratory case study that aimed to explore the causes for which students abandon their studies in higher education. Findings suggest three leading causes influencing students' decision to drop out of their university program, namely academic, personal, and economic issues. Findings also demonstrate the complexity and multifactorial reasons influencing students' decision to abandon their educational programs. The academic factors grouped specific causes related to the curriculum (e.g., misinformation regarding program objectives, management of educational programs, and lack of support from educational authorities and educators), teaching (e.g., limited resources and lack of teacher empathy), and learning (e.g., high level of complexity of educational programs, academic failure. Personal factors also included causes related to the curriculum (e.g., new and different interests); teaching (e.g., stress and emotional loads); and learning (e.g., conflicts within their family, health problems). Additionally, we recognize that high-level stress and emotional loads cuts across all three themes. The final category, economic factors, included causes related to students' feeling obliged to change their residency, and undergoing financial hardship.

Findings from this study have important implications for educational policy that intersect with the curriculum, teaching, and learning. Some causes are heavily dependent on the university, for instance, academic causes in which implementing strategic programs university-wide could help improve the problems identified and prevent other students from dropping out of their studies. Some examples include the inclusion and development of "soft

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skills" as part of teacher training programs, establishing permanent communication channels between students and educators, improving the promotion of educational programs to ensure students are familiarized with the major before registration, and offering tutoring programs for students in courses with high failure rates. In the case of economic causes, multidimensional and holistic strategies are required to help students improve their academics and respond to their overall financial needs, especially for those who live or come from other cities and towns. Finally, personal factors are perhaps the most challenging causes to propose solutions to because the factor cannot be directly attributed, nor do they depend solely or mainly on the institution. It is crucial for universities to develop institutional programs to help their students overcome the social and emotional difficulties they encounter during their academic studies. Students' inability to manage stress was a recurrent cause in this study. Therefore, it would be essential to offer additional guidance to students during their initial semesters, with workshops and training on how to cope with stress and problem-solving, and also to provide more funds and support to students who are in financial difficulties.

In terms of future research, findings from this study offer a solid basis and recommendations for policymakers to implement strategies that help and guide students throughout their school years. Within the limitations of this study, we recognize that the findings obtained cannot be generalized to other universities in different contexts. Other suggestions for future research include mapping school dropout to identify how it intersects and correlates with other factors, including poverty, access to technology, and rurality. As well, other areas of attention could be creating models to predict the causes and consequences of early leaving within higher education programs to help reduce the number of students leaving their studies.

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