

Student Enrollment and Retention at Antioch College:

could enrollment and retention be related to
campus climate?

I am writing this out of deep concern for Antioch College. Beginning in 1974, Antioch began a precipitous decline in enrollment, which almost closed it. Since then, despite heroic efforts by the Board of Trustees, by the faculty and staff at the College, and by many administrators, Antioch has not experienced a robust recovery. Why not? It is my conviction that a few critical problems have mostly been mis-diagnosed. And, if problems are not diagnosed accurately, how can we hope to find successful solutions? We have not taken a careful enough look at Antioch's recent history. Without appreciating Antioch's strengths, understanding where the real problems lie, and designing appropriate solutions, efforts to stabilize Antioch have failed, or at least not helped enough. Without better retention, all other efforts to stabilize Antioch College will not succeed.

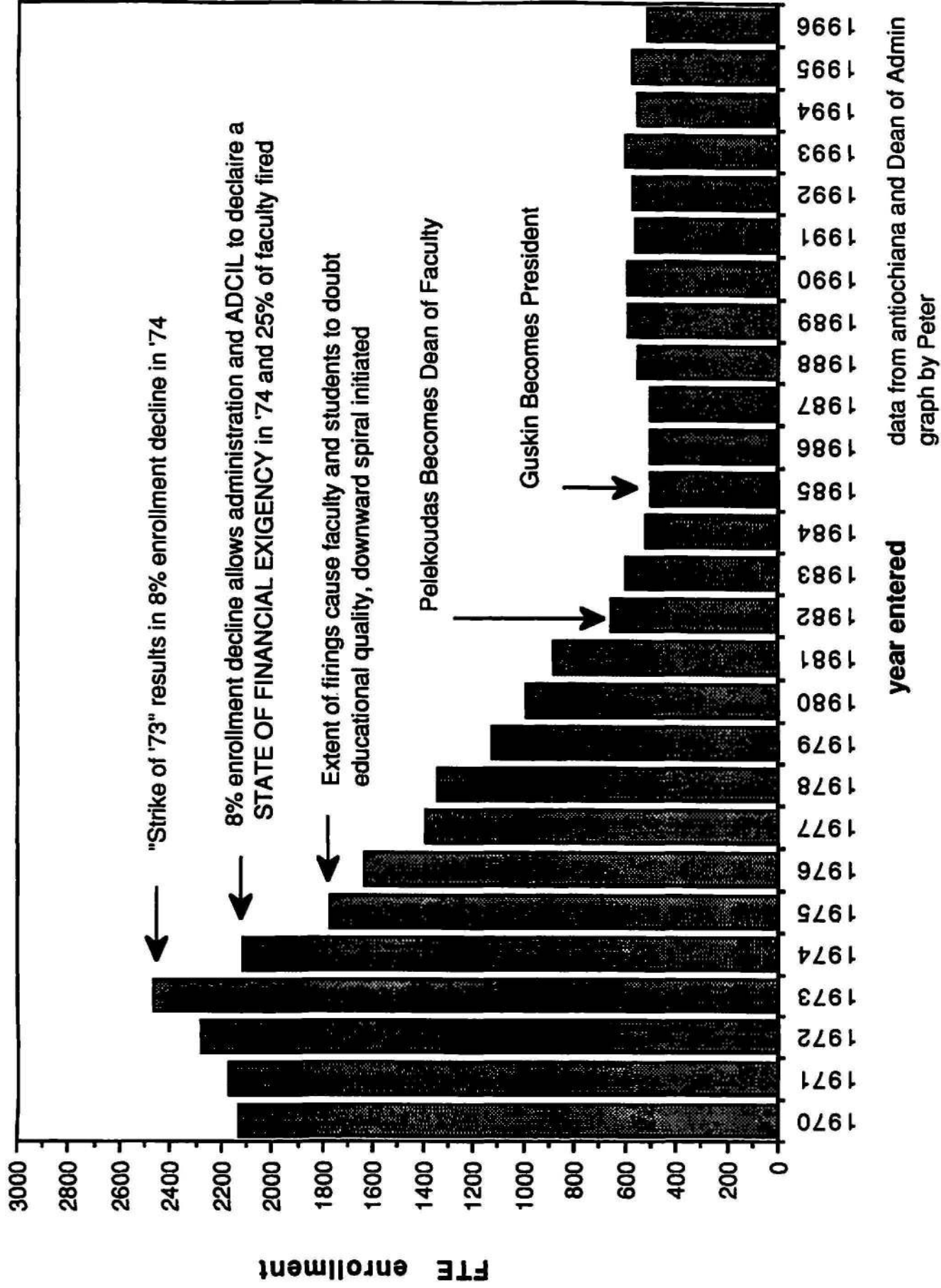
What is happening with student retention at Antioch College? To gain perspective on this question, one needs historical as well as current perspective. Figure 1 puts our recent enrollment in perspective by presenting full time student enrollment for 1970 - 1992. In the period 1992 - 1996, FTE enrollment has drifted down to about 500 students. Since this figure was prepared in 1992, these data are not shown. Figure 1 shows the precipitous decline in enrollment that began in 1974, which began to stabilize in 1982, and was stabilized by 1984. Although enrollment had improved slightly by 1992, it has drifted back down to about 500 by 1996.

From 1973 until about 1983, the college reeled under the effects of the strike, the firings, and the subsequent enrollment collapse. College administration after College administration toppled and collapsed under the pressures that resulted. Administrative instability was such that for one year the Dean of Faculty (with no Assistant Dean) was also Acting College Provost (equivalent to College President) and Acting College Business Manager (equivalent to our current Dean of Administration and Finance).

If we look at the Antioch College average retention/graduation rates since enrollment was stabilized in 1984, we see some interesting trends. The Antioch College retention/graduation rates have historically been and continue to be much lower than at some other quality small private liberal arts colleges. It appears that staying at Antioch for 4 years is difficult for many students. The best retention rates in Antioch's history were 59% retention to graduation in the period 1961-1970. Why? Over the years, many who have looked at our historic retention rates have concluded that transitioning from college, to co-op, back to college, and back to co-op, is extremely difficult for many students, as is the uncertainty of not knowing

ANTIOCH COLLEGE ENROLLMENT 1970-1996

FIGURE 1



where you will be, or who you will be working with, next work period. There is a common assumption that the stress of change probably accounts for our lower retention rates. Co-op is such a vital part of Antioch's educational excellence, however, that few suggest Antioch should even consider education (or life) without co-op. Looking at recent historic graduation/retention data may present opportunities for addressing some important problems.

Recent Trends in Antioch Retention Rates, by year in College

Annual retention rates for students who entered Antioch as transfers or with no prior college, are available from the registrar's office for the period 1984-1995. Examining recent retention rates by year in college and by new or transfer student status shows that some important general trends exist in recent retention data. Figure 2 presents retention rates at the end of the first year, for students who entered Antioch from 1984 through 1995. Although there is a slight decline over time in these data, the trend is relatively small compared to later trends. Clearly there is more variation from year to year in transfer retention, than in students who enter with no prior college. Partly this may be due to smaller numbers of transfers, where a few students choosing to stay or leave makes a big difference in the average for the year.

FIGURE 2 **ANTIOCH COLLEGE 1st YEAR RETENTION RATE**
FOR STUDENTS WHO ENTERED 1984-95

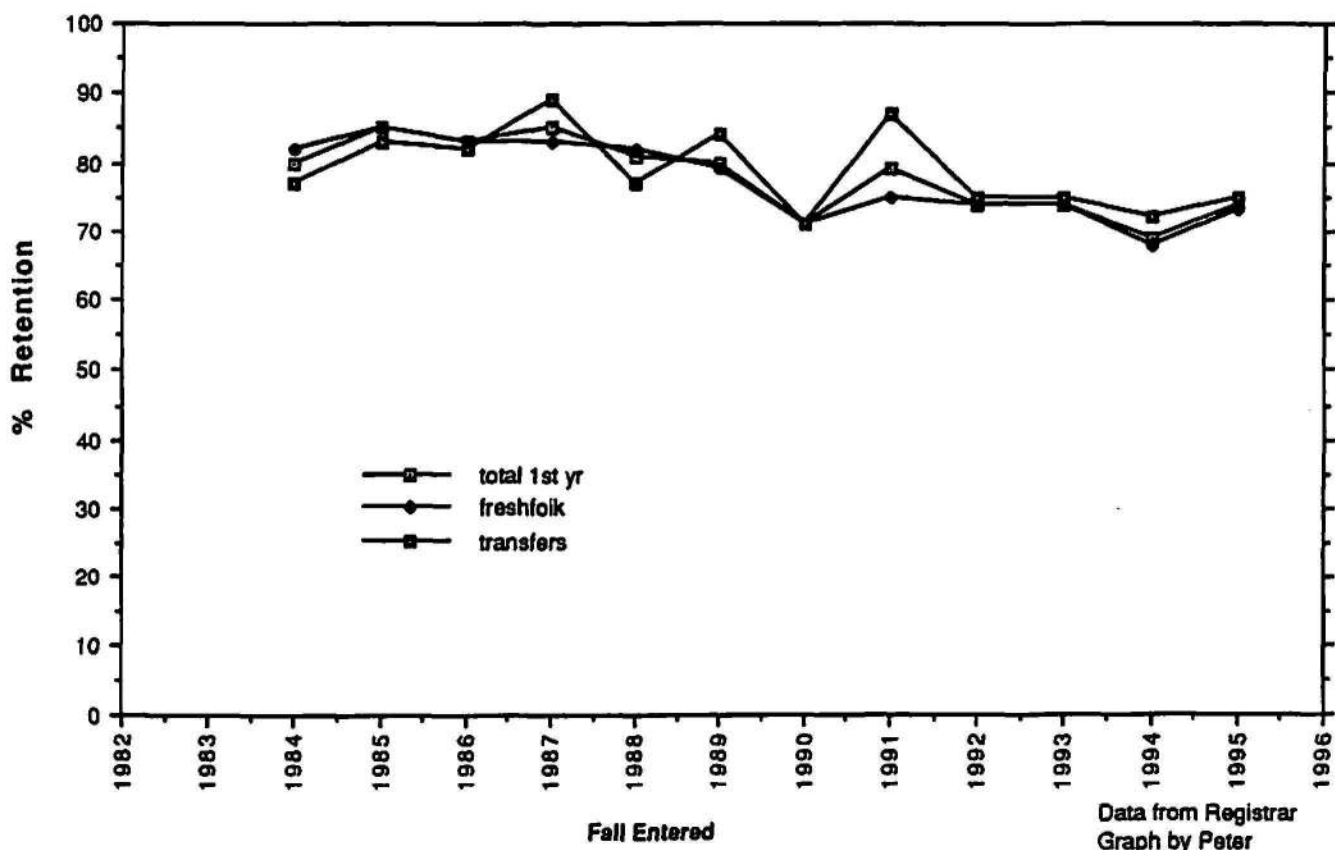


FIGURE 3

**ANTIOCH COLLEGE 2nd YEAR RETENTION RATE
FOR STUDENTS WHO ENTERED 1984-94**

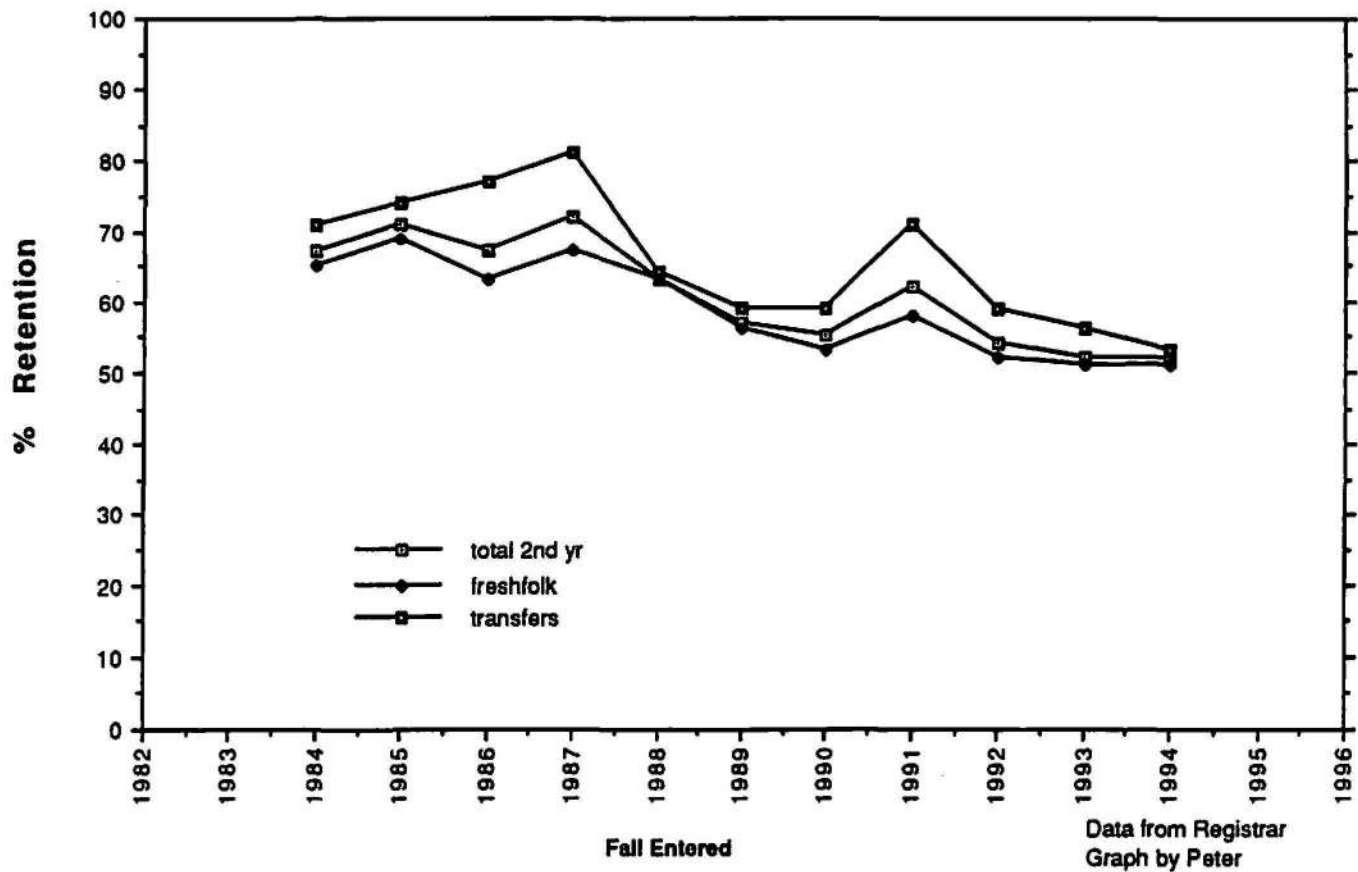


Figure 3 shows retention rates at the end of the second year of study, for students who entered between 1984 and 1994. There is a discernible and alarming trend in the overall data. For the period 1984-1987 the data show significantly higher average retention at the end of the second year than for the period 1988-1994. It appears that, beginning in 1988, something began to produce a strong negative influence on Antioch retention, for students who had been here two years.

FIGURE 4

**ANTIOCH COLLEGE 3rd YEAR RETENTION RATE
FOR STUDENTS WHO ENTERED 1984-93**

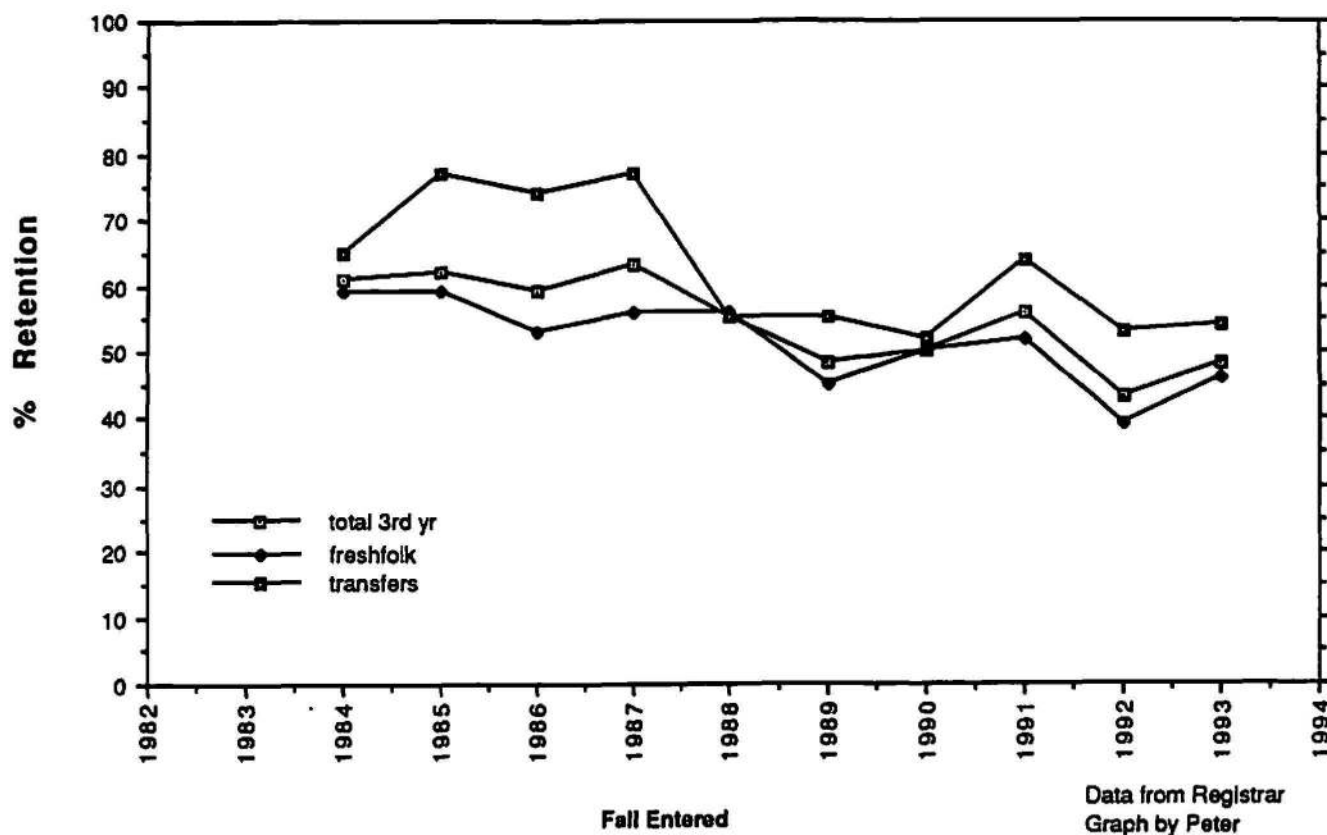


Figure 4 shows retention rates at the end of the third year of study, for students who entered between 1984 and 1993. Figure 4 shows that retention at the end of the third year of study, of students who entered from 1984-1987, was noticeably higher than 3rd year retention for students who entered after 1987. As was true in the case of 2nd year retention, it appears that beginning in 1988, something was producing a strong negative influence on Antioch retention.

FIGURE 5

**ANTIOCH COLLEGE 4th YEAR RETENTION RATE
FOR STUDENTS WHO ENTERED 1984-92**

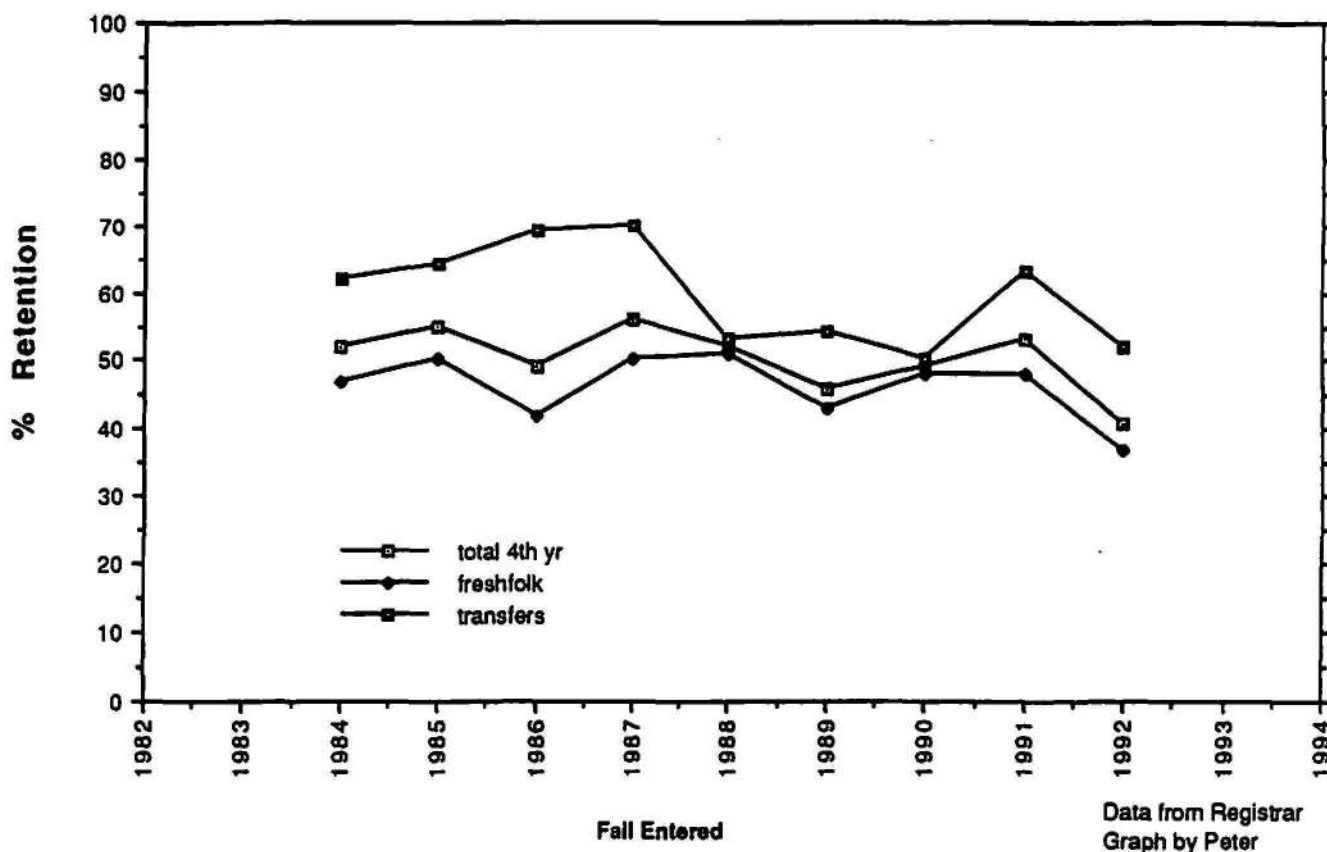
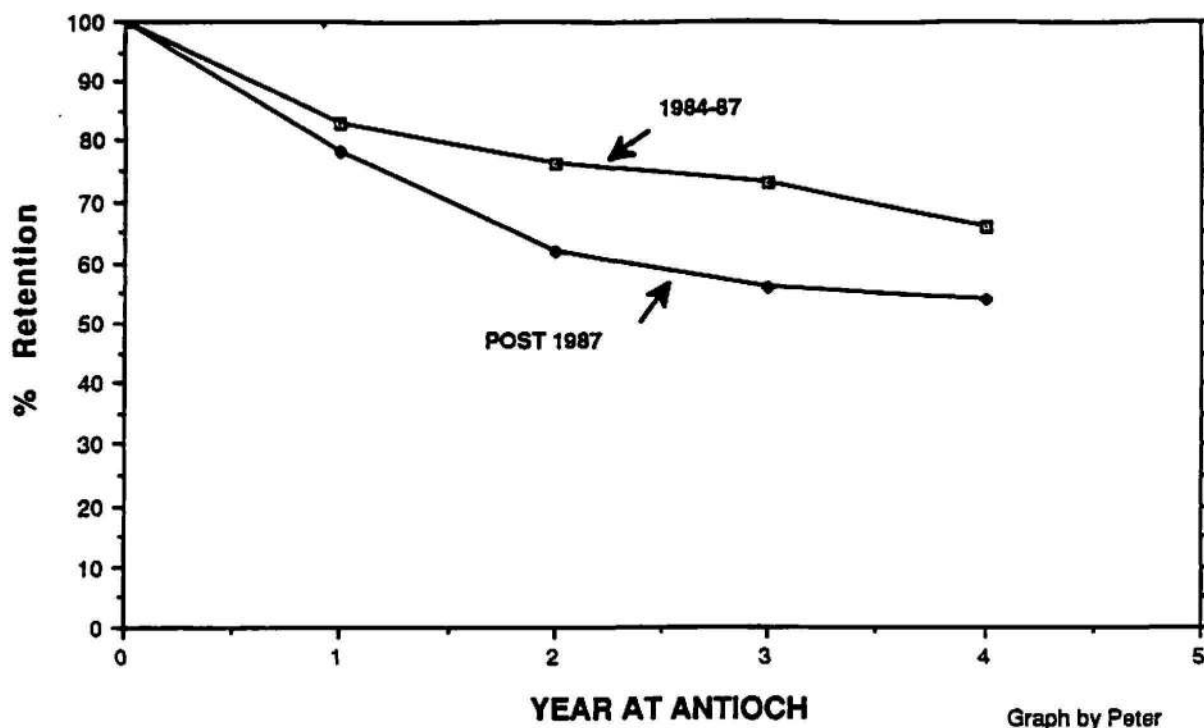
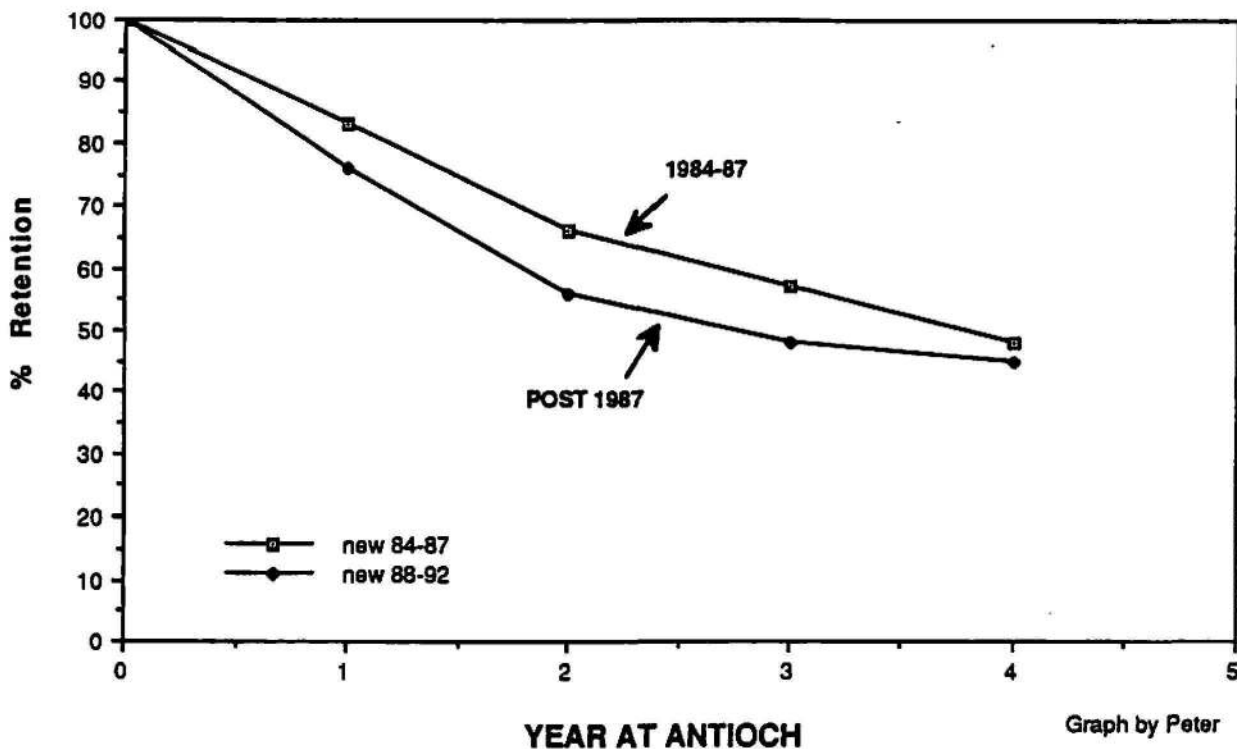


Figure 5 shows retention rates at the end of the fourth year of study. Figure 5 shows that retention at the end of the fourth year of study, of transfer students who entered from 1984-1987, was again noticeably higher than similar retention of transfer students who entered after 1987. However, little difference is discernible in the fourth year, between students who entered as new students in the period 1984-1987, and students who entered as new students in the period 1988-1992.

FIGURE 6**AVERAGE RETENTION RATES FOR TRANSFER STUDENTS
1984-1987 AND POST 1987****FIGURE 7****AVERAGE RETENTION RATES FOR NEW STUDENTS
1984-87 AND POST 1987**

Figures 6 and 7 present a summary of the data in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5. Since retention rates of students who entered 1984-1987 appear to be noticeably different from retention rates of students who entered after 1987, the two groups are separated. Since retention of first time students shows a different pattern from transfer student retention, Figures 6 and 7 separate new students from transfer students.

Interpretation and Conclusions

The graphs on the previous pages show what actually happened with retention in the past; the graphs do not tell us why retention changed. My interpretation of this data is given below. Something negative happened to affect retention after 1987. What happened in 1987-88?

In late 1986 or early 1987 College President Alan Guskin fired Dean of Faculty Connie Pelekoudas. In August of 1987 a new Dean of Faculty, Valora Washington, arrived. In winter 1988 Michael Bassis arrived as Executive Vice President. The initiation of Valora's Deanship, the Bassis Vice Presidency, and a perceived general negative attitude by top administrators toward faculty, staff, and administrators who tried to suggest ideas and solutions that differed from the accepted solutions, changed the working atmosphere for many of us to punitive and negative. Either you overtly supported proposed solutions, you were silent, or you were "uncomfortable" in your work environment.

Also during this time new faculty were sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly mentored to see the existing programs and senior faculty in a negative light. I believe that the ripple effects of punitive treatment for individuals who exercised free speech, and the often negative mentoring of new faculty changed the climate from one of general optimism regarding our educational strengths, to one of general pessimism regarding our educational program and strengths.

An alternative possible interpretation is that students left due to dissatisfaction with the new curriculum that was instituted in 1987-1988.

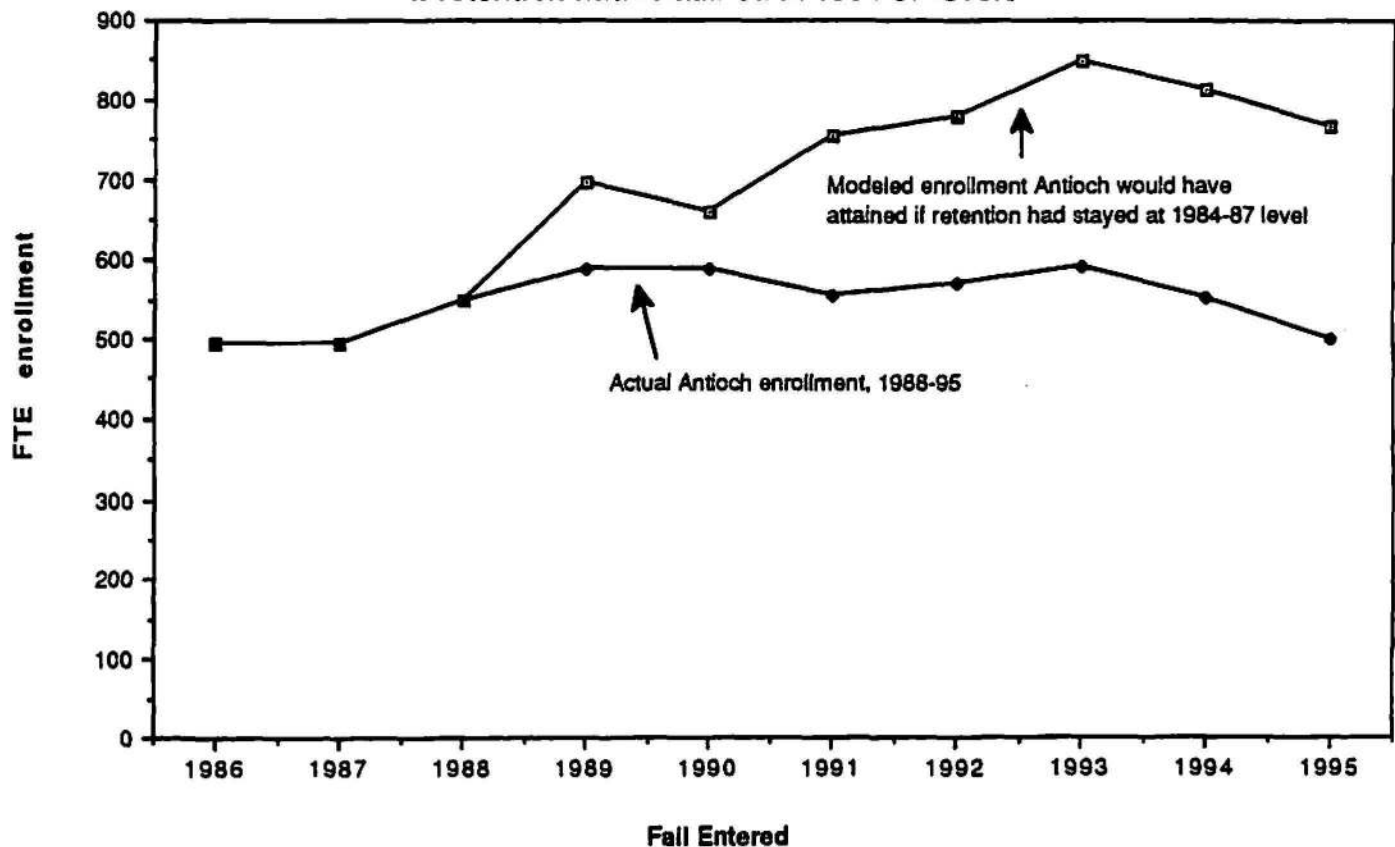
For our financial survival, it is imperative that Antioch College regain our 1984 - 1987 retention levels. What changed and how can we change it back? There seem two obvious routes to determining what changed. We must convene a group of key campus leaders from that time and ask them to summarize critical differences before and after 1987-88. The group should be chaired by Connie Pelekoudas (Dean of Faculty and faculty chair at that time), Steve Schwerner (Dean of Students at that time), Elaine Comeges (Associate Dean of Students at that time), Joan Chappelle (Director of Counseling at that time), Melva Rue (Registrar at that time), Katy Jako should be consulted by phone (Director of Institutional Research at that time), Jewel Graham (faculty emeritus), Al Denman (faculty chair), Bob Parker (Director of Co-op at that time). The group should, as a minimum, revisit withdrawal interview data and should provide us with recommendations on how to return to 1984-1987 retention levels.

What Could Enrollment Have Been If Retention Had Not Fallen?

Figure 8 Shows a graph of actual Antioch College enrollment from 1986 through 1995, and a second curve that is a model of what enrollment would have been if retention had remained at 1984-1987 levels. Due to increased admissions, we would have reached an enrollment in the high 700's by 1991. Obviously, something terrible happened in the year 1987-1988, and this problem remains within Antioch College today. Unless we find out what it is, and fix it, we are in serious trouble.

How do current graduation/retention rates compare to historic graduation/retention rates?

FIGURE 8
GRAPH OF ANTIOCH ENROLLMENT:
actual enrollment and model of enrollment
if retention had remained at 1984-87 levels



Historic Graduation/Retention Rates

Figure 9 shows historic Antioch College graduation/retention rates. Retention at Antioch averaged 59% during the period 1961-1970, under the 4 quarter calendar. If calendar affects retention, why didn't we consider returning to a four quarter calendar, instead of trying something untried?

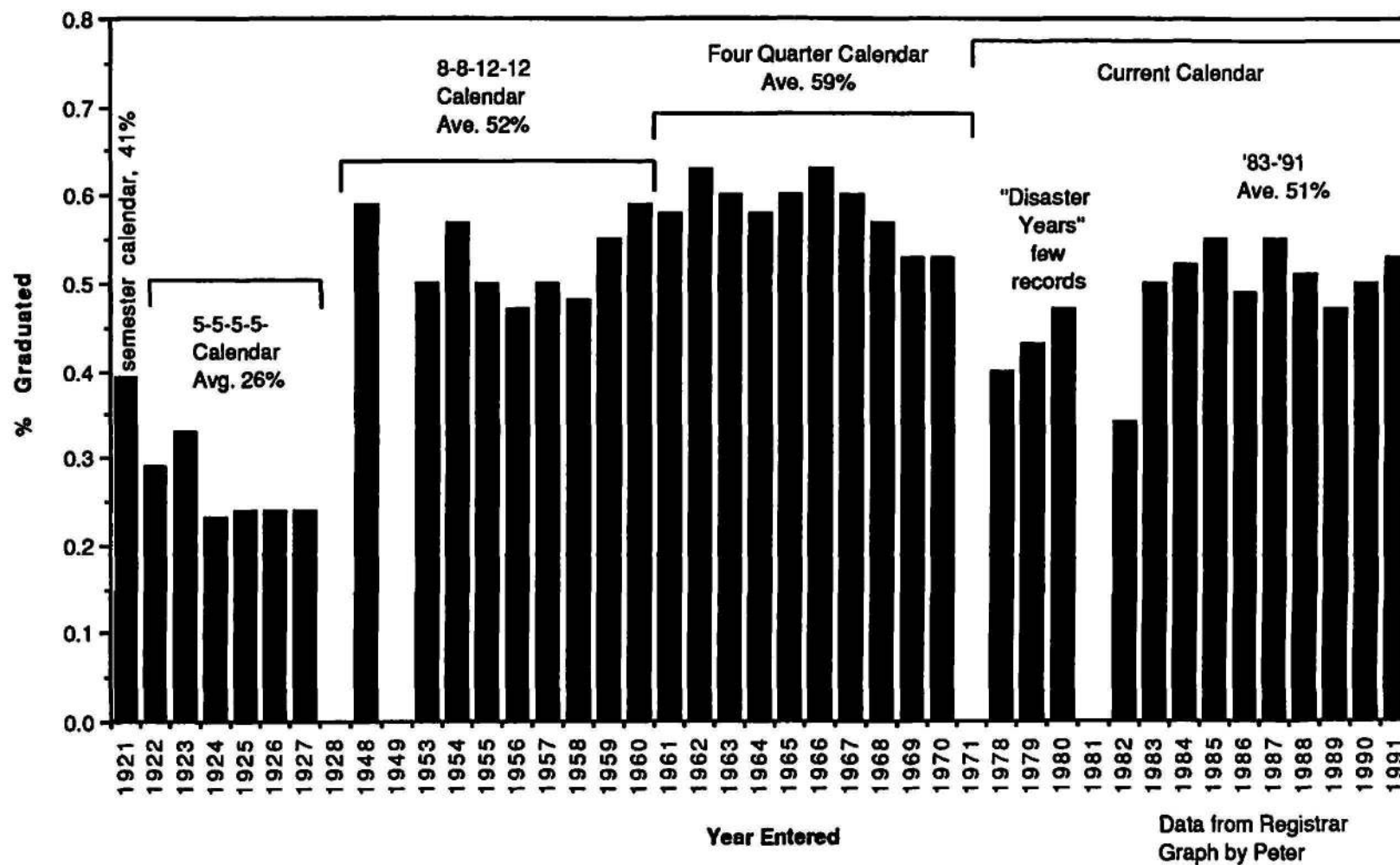
By 1948, extending through 1959, the college was on the 8-8-12-12 calendar. All faculty taught 40 weeks, and students alternately worked and studied on two rigidly enforced divisions. Retention/graduation averaged 52%, about the same as current rates. In the 1973-1976 period, when the four quarter calendar was still in effect, retention/graduation were reportedly much worse than 59%, but data for that period are not available. The current calendar was adopted in 1977 because we concluded that we couldn't afford to run the classroom program all 4 quarters with enrollment below 800. During the period 1977-1983 College retention was very low, (average 41% for '78-'80 and '82) and records are incomplete. Low retention during this time was due to administrative instability and insufficiency, as explained above, and had little or nothing to do with our calendar.

In 1983 Connie Pelekoudas became Dean of Faculty. He provided stability, insightful leadership, and was the only Antioch leader who had been able to stabilize our retention/graduation rates. In 1983 we also began a curriculum that utilized the strengths of the rather tattered but still excellent faculty who had weathered the storms of the previous ten years. The college was able to maintain retention rates begun under Dean Pelekoudas through 1987, when a noticeable decrease occurred.

Figure 9 shows that at Antioch College there is no historical precedent for long-term retention above 60%. Some excellent small private liberal arts colleges, in the past and in the present, have had and continue to maintain significantly higher retention/graduation rates. For example, current retention/graduation rates at Albion are about 65%, at Oberlin retention is about 70%, at Kenyon retention is about 87%, and Kalamazoo, with the off-campus K plan, retention runs about 68%. I contend that higher Antioch College esprit-de-corps may be responsible for higher retention in the 1960's. During the 60's Antioch's testing and evaluation office churned out study after study, presenting clear evidence of the success of the Antioch education. Ruth Churchill's Office of Educational Testing and Evaluation was producing data that quantitatively demonstrated how very effective an Antioch education is. Her annual reports to the faculty educated new faculty to the truly marvelous effectiveness of the Antioch educational model; and her numerous national publications educated the outside world to the effectiveness of our educational program. Due to Ruth Churchill's studies, no new administrator or faculty member could doubt our educational effectiveness. That knowledge filtered down to the students and there was much more of a sense of educational success than there is now. Somehow, we need to regain our sense of appreciation for the Antioch educational model, and regain an understanding of the successes we have with students.

FIGURE 9

Antioch College Graduation Rates 1921-1991



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