Barriers to Student Persistence in Higher Education

A literature review

By

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Introduction

Student persistence and departure is one of the most studied areas in higher education (Tinto, 1993; Braxton, 2000). Braxton, Shaw-Sullivan and Johnson (1997) indicate that the lack of student persistence constitute a puzzle. In citing Tinto (1993), they write:

> …Institutional rates of student departure constitute a puzzle, one which might be labeled the departure puzzle. Given the availability of numerous guides on the selection of colleges and universities and the enormous amount of attention that parents, students and college officials focus upon the college selection process, it is puzzling that almost one-half of students entering two-year colleges and more than one-fourth of students entering four-year collegiate institutions depart these institutions at the end of their first year.

The decline in the number of traditional college students has also resulted in an increased interest in the areas of attrition and retention. About two decades ago, Greer (1980) indicated that the traditional applicant pool of people aged 18 to 24 is shrinking. In a time of declining enrollments and with the continued shrinking pool of traditional age potential college students, one prominent institutional goal has emerged - retain a higher percentage of students who enroll. Thus, student persistence has come to the forefront in higher education strategic planning. Many institutions that struggle to keep their programs and services available are enrollment driven and do not have the large endowments to provide a cushion for their operation. Thus, they are dependent on tuition dollars generated by student enrollment. Student persistence is an absolute must for schools such as this. Small private colleges that are unsubsidized by state tax revenue are even more vulnerable than public state supported institutions.

The 1998 National Center for Education Statistics reported that nearly 30 percent of 1989-1990 beginning students left postsecondary education before the beginning of their second year. Sixteen percent of students enrolled in the four-year sector left, while a whopping forty-two percent of students enrolled in the public two-year sector left. According to Brawer (1996), while statistics remain fairly constant, approximately 50 percent of the freshmen enrolled in colleges and universities drop out before completing their programs.

Lana Low (2000), Vice President for Noel-Levitz Group, experts in the field of retention, reported about the satisfaction of college students as an important indicator of persistence. Low (2000) indicates that successful institutions focus on the needs of their students, continually improve the quality of the educational experience, and use student

satisfaction data to shape their directions. A logical premise is that satisfied students stay in school and complete their program.

D. Sydow (1996) and company reported about efforts at Mountain Empire Community College, with an average 50 percent first-to-second-year dropout rate and a similarly high fall-to-spring semester dropout rate. In 1995 student retention (i.e. persistence) was identified as an institutional priority. A college wide retreat involving all faculty, staff, and administrators was scheduled to inform constituents about the college's retention effort and to involve the entire college community in working together to understand how to implement effective retention strategies. A standing retention committee was formed at the college to oversee implementation of the retention plan. At the request of this writer, Crichton College formed a retention task force in the spring of 1999. A review of college data indicated that well over five million dollars was lost in tuition revenue due to student attrition over the prior three years period. With an annual operating budget of less than 10 million, this amount was deemed significant.

Theoretical constructs focus on economic, societal, psychological, organizational, and interactionalist factors that explain college attrition (Tinto, 1993). A large body of published research has focused on traditional residential campuses. In their paper titled "Retention of Non-Traditional Students", Prather and Hand (1986) focus on identifying indicators of persistence of non-traditional students at a large commuter institution. In a later study, Stolar (1991) makes recommendations for enhancing campus services for Cumberland County College's non-traditional aged student population. Thus to be effective in building enrollment, research must focus on persistence of both traditional

and non-traditional students in public, private, commuter, and residential colleges and universities.

Literature Review

Braxton et al. (1997, p. 107) indicate that the following five perspectives account for constructs about college student persistence:

1) Economic – This focus is on the costs of college attendance weighed against future fiscal benefits. In other words, will the investment pay off down the road? If so, then to what degree?

2) Societal – This focus is on the societal factors that impact student dropout. Like, how many friends did the student make during orientation week? What kind of peer support system does the student have in place?

3) Psychological – This focus is on the maturity of psychological characteristics as related to persistence.

4) Organizational – This focus is on organizational characteristics as related to student dropout. Lack of campus activities, large class sizes, and inadequate staffing are just of a few organizational issues.

5) Interactionalist – This focus is on the interaction between the student and the college. Key to this approach is the value that the student places on formal and informal levels of the college community.

Tinto's (1975; 1987; 1993) model of student departure, an interactionalist approach, is probably the most known in the field of higher education. His approach has garnered praise and criticism over the years. Braxton et al. (1997) attributes over 400 citations to

the model by 1994. Although Tinto's (1975) model admittedly does not take into account

other theoretical perspectives, it is still the bar by which other models are measured. In

discussing his longitudinal model, Tinto (1993, p.113) indicates:

> Broadly understood, it argues that individual departure from institutions can be
>
> viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an
>
> individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational
>
> experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of
>
> the academic and social systems of the institution. The individual's experience in
>
> those systems, as indicated by his/her intellectual (academic) and social (personal)
>
> integration, continually modifies his or her intentions and commitments. Positive
>
> experiences - that is, integrative ones - reinforce persistence through their impact
>
> upon heightened intentions and commitments both to the goal of college
>
> completion and to the institution in which the person finds him/herself (Cabrera,
>
> Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler (1992). Negative or malintegrative experiences
>
> serve to weaken intentions and commitments, especially commitment to the
>
> institution, and thereby enhance the likelihood of leaving.

Tinto (1993, p. 81) identifies student departure as taking two forms, academic

dismissal and voluntary withdrawal. However only 15 to 25 percent of all institutional

departures come as a result of academic failure. The remaining 75 to 85 percent come as

a result of voluntary withdrawal. Tinto's model proposes that individuals enter

institutions of higher education with a range of differing family and community

backgrounds (e.g. social status, parental education), a variety of personal attributes (e.g.

sex, race), skills (social, intellectual), financial resources, dispositions (e.g. motivations,

political references), and various types of precollege educational experiences and achievements. These attributes are filtered through the students' commitment to the institution and their personal goal to graduate. Each attribute is posited as having a direct impact upon departure from college.

From the "Interactionalist lens" I will briefly look at six independent variables that, unless properly addressed, present significant barriers to student persistence. Albeit this list is not an exhaustive set of persistence barriers, but only general variables which are clearly identified and supported in the literature. They are as follows: 1) Lack of preparation, 2) External commitments, 3) Social isolation, 4) Financial need, 5) Interaction with faculty, and 6) Academic failure.

Lack of preparation

Ely (1997) reports that the non-traditional student, or adult learner, is making up the new majority in higher education. Culross (1996) reported that 45% of all college students were 25 or older and on the increase. Today they account for over 50% of all students. The average non-traditional student is age 25 or older, and has returned to school either full-time or part-time. However, many adult students lack the basic reading, writing, and math skills required for enrollment in some college-level courses, either because they failed to take the necessary prerequisites in high school, or because they completed such courses but need review courses to update their skills for subsequent work (Culross, 1996).

Some leaders in higher education question the feasibility of offering solid remedial programs to address academic under-preparedness of new students. Moses

(1999) argues that some presidents are reluctant to take a stand on remediation for the following reasons. First there is a dearth of data about the effects of remediation because institutions that offer developmental courses often do not label them as such, nor do they track the effectiveness of their programs. Second, there is no generic definition of what "remediation" means. For some institutions this is simply offering a brush-up class in Algebra, English Composition, or College Study Principles. Whereas for other colleges this means offering an entire array of courses complete with counselors, tutors and advisors.

Colleges and universities that fail to offer "solid" remedial programming do a disservice to the growing numbers of adult students that seek post-secondary education. This also hurts the traditional student that needs remedial help as well. A recent series of events at Crichton College, where this writer was employed, supported this premise. For two consecutive years the college accepted a large number of marginal applicants, or individuals in need of some remediation, into the school. The remedial program consisted of three basic skills advancement classes and limited tutorial support. Over one-half of these students dropped out in the first month of class. Only a remnant of these students remained after their first year. Admittedly, one can make the argument that colleges and universities should not admit individuals into their institutions unless they are willing to offer the remedial support necessary for them to be successful.

External commitments

The mean age of students enrolled for credit in 1980 was twenty-seven, the median age was twenty-three, and the modal age was nineteen. By 1991 the mean had

surpassed thirty-one. Over one-half of today's students are non-traditional (25 and up).

Oftentimes they work full-time jobs, are raising kids, have regular family responsibilities,

and are involved in life away from the campus. They tend to be part-time with adult life

responsibilities and have very little time for campus involvement. The nature of their life

in general is a barrier to their persistence in college.

Ely (1997) indicates that the two largest concerns for the older student are family

and finances. The older student may very well experience guilt attempting to balance

his/her education, job, family, and household. Because of their many personal

responsibilities and rigid schedule, they have little time for extracurricular campus

activities. They are essentially on campus to attend classes, utilize the library and conduct

research. Unless absolutely necessary, you will not find them in Student Services. This

student typically commutes and experiences added stress and time loss due to travel.

Brawer (1996) indicates that full-time younger students are more likely to persist

than older part-time students. Residential students are more likely to be involved in

campus life and generally are more likely to persist than commuter students. Colleges and

universities must find a way to address the needs of older students, and other commuters,

to enable them to get involved in campus life. Special orientation sessions and

programming for the entire family are just two ideas that merit consideration.

Social Isolation

Braxton et al. (1997, p. 123) tested fifteen propositions hypothesized to be

directly related to student departure decisions. Their ninth proposition was as follows -

the greater the level of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment

to the institution. In other words, students that get involved socially on campus persist to a greater degree than those that do not get involved. The researchers findings did indicate statistical support for their hypothesis.

Students that do not invest the time, energy, and resources into developing social relationships with their peers do not take ownership of the institution at a level consistent with those who do. Peer pressure may very well play a factor. Students that have relationships with other students may think about dropping out, only to be talked out of it by a friend. Sometimes it's easier to "tough it out" when you have a buddy or girlfriend that is toughing it out with you. Peer pressure expands beyond the adolescent years.

Colleges must consider creative programming that will encourage interaction and involvement from its participants. As educators, we must be careful not to minimize the importance of good old-fashioned friendships in the student persistence formula.

Interaction with faculty

Astin (1977) reported that students who interact more frequently with faculty report significantly greater satisfaction with the college environment. Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe (1986) emphasize the influence of faculty involvement on student retention and satisfaction with education. Kramer and Spencer (1989, p. 105) state:

> Overall, faculty-student contact is an important factor in student achievement, persistence, academic-skill development, personal development, and general satisfaction with the college experience.

They go on to urge faculty to get involved in the advising process, along with professional and/or peer advisors. They purport, "There is evidence that when freshmen

and faculty become acquainted and interact, they form a foundation upon which future

contacts can be established."

Accordingly, faculty advising is key to the notion of retaining students. Academic

advising can provide the link between the college and the student, especially during the

critical first year. Kramer et al. (1989) indicates that academic advising can reduce

alienation and enhance learning. If the advisors are available and well informed, they can

contribute to a student's sense of belonging to the campus community. Quality advising

supports student learning and fosters student involvement in the institution, both keys to

the persistence of students. Mentoring is another form of faculty interaction.

Johnson (1989) says that mentoring involves dealing with the total personality of

an individual in order to advise, counsel, and provide them with guidance. Mentors fill

many roles such as friend, advisor, activities coordinator and personal counselor. Their

roles differ from student to student. Mentors teach in "the classroom of life", while their

lectures are delivered one-on-one. Research data indicate that mentoring ranges from peer

mentoring in secondary education to studies of graduate education in doctoral programs

(Queen, 1994; Wilde and Schau, 1991). The mentoring relationship itself can take on

various faces. However this form of faculty interaction is worthwhile and critical to

student persistence.

Financial need

Unfortunately financial aid continues to be a major factor in the lack of student

persistence. Saint John, Cabrera, Nora and Asker (2000) say that national studies show

finance-related factors (student aid, tuition, and other costs, including living) explained

about half the total variance in the student persistence process. According to Merriam and

Caffarella (1999, p. 56), lack of money is one of the two most cited reasons for adult

nonparticipation in adult education, including higher education. Tinto (1993, p. 65) cites

the effect of finances upon student attrition can be indirect and long-term as well as short-

term in character. Family finances affect persistence through their influence of

educational goals. Finances also affect decisions on whether to attend college in the first

place, how much education to seek, and where one chooses to attend college.

 Financial concerns can induce persons to enter institutions in ways that may

increase the likelihood of departure prior to degree completion. For instance, a person

may choose to attend an inexpensive 2-year college rather than seek the four-year degree

they desire. They might choose to attend a lower caliber institution because of lack of

resources.

 Because of personal family resources, or lack thereof, many students must work

part or full-time just to meet their expenses. In one study, 33.4% of adults gave cost as a

barrier for job-related education, while 25.4% reported cost as a barrier to non-work-

related education (Valentine, 1997). No doubt this statistic says a lot about working

adults in college. While students are already operating on a tight budget, any significant

family event (illness of parent, marriage of child) can prompt them to withdraw from

college.

 The federal government has shifted from offering grants and scholarships to

providing student loans. Many students are reluctant to take on huge debt without the

promise of a high paying job. The burden has shifted to states to provide financial

assistance for needy individuals. However, this money is reserved for full-time students

only. Thus, older part-time students are "left out in the cold." State legislatures would do

well to address this barrier by providing financial assistance to part-time college students as well.

Academic failure

Prather's et al. (1986) study determined indicators of persistence of nontraditional students at a large commuter state university. His literature review covered student variables affecting retention rates, ethnic status and retention, institutional variables affecting persistence, and theoretical models that explained persistence. Prather says in his summary and conclusions:

It was found that academic integration as measured by GPA was by far the best indicator of persistence.

His findings are consistent in other research on non-traditional students. Tinto (1993, p. 117) indicates that academic failure reflects a scenario in which the demands of the college or university prove too hard. In some select cases, academic boredom (i.e. classes not challenging) may result in student attrition. Still some academic dismissals are a result of a decision made by the individual not to invest the time and energy needed to maintain minimum academic standards.

Working takes vital time away from study time and other time students can spend on campus. A natural result is that GPA's for working students, often older with family responsibilities, will suffer. Colleges must seek to establish intervention systems to address students with academic deficiencies. Counselors and advisors can intervene to steer students into the "right courses" and counsel them to take a lighter load if necessary. Colleges must invest in support personnel that have the knowledge and breathe of experience necessary to assist the adult learner in his/her educational pursuit.

In Conclusion

This paper seeks to address the problem of student persistence and six of the major variables associated with it. It is in no way an exhaustive examination of the numerous variables associated with this problem. This paper is a brief attempt to address six of the major variables associated with student persistence. Educators and leaders would do well to modify their programming based on observations and recommendations detailed in this paper. In a time of declining enrollments, retention programming and student persistence is key to sustaining fiscal health in organizations of higher education.

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