Research Proposal:

How Academic and Social Factors Relate to Persistence Among First-Year College Students

Julie M. Somppi, Cortney TenBrook

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Dr. Craig Mertler
Introduction

Undergraduate student retention is a vital concern to many colleges and universities, as enrollment during the 1980’s and 1990’s continued to decline (Tinto, 1993). Even though leaving college before earning a degree can be positive for some students, dropping out can be a negative experience for both students and higher education institutions. Over half of the students that choose to leave college depart prior to the start of the sophomore year (Tinto, 1998). Therefore, the first year of college has a strong impact on a student’s decision to stay or leave their respective institution (Frost, 1993). Research on this topic is significant because it helps university administrators and faculty members to better understand what students need. As a result, many colleges and universities have begun to develop programs to help first year students be retained into their second year. In order to successfully develop these programs, researchers must first determine the factors that contribute to a student’s decision to stay or leave an institution.

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that play into the retention of first-year students from their first to second years in college. Past research has concluded that a student’s academic and social integration directly impacts the decision to stay at the institution (Tinto, 1998). However, further research is crucial in helping to determine what specific factors, either academic or social, may eventually lead to college departure. Determining these factors will help colleges and universities to develop programs and services that will successfully aid first year students so they can matriculate to their sophomore year.

The study proposed here will attempt to answer the following primary question: How do academic and social factors contribute to first year students’ persistence? Two secondary questions will also be addressed: What is the most contributing academic factor?
What is the most contributing social factor? These answers will enable institutions to design and alter programs and services that will retain a greater number of students between the first and second years of college.

For purposes of this study, a first year student is defined as new, first-time entering student at a four-year, public institution in the Midwest. These students are registered in baccalaureate degree programs for the Fall semester, 2000. Persistence is defined as the proportion of students enrolled Fall semester 2000 who were still enrolled at the beginning of Fall semester 2001.

It is important to note that the participants of this study will be limited (by the researchers’ control) to traditional aged first year students at a four-year public institution. Results of this study may not be representative of two-year or privately affiliated institutions. Gender, race, socio-economic status, level of academic achievement, and social maturity may create limitations within the results of this research project.

During this study it was assumed that the participants were freshmen college students who graduated from high school the previous year. It was also assumed the participants provided honest and open answers on the survey administered. Since this study will require the use of electronic mail, it was assumed that the participants of this study have the technological capabilities needed to complete a survey via email.

**Literature Review**

As one of the most prolific authors on the topic, Vincent Tinto stated that nearly fifty-seven percent of all college students who opt to leave their institutions do so prior to their second years (1996). Tinto also went on to mention that of the fifty-seven percent of college students leaving institutions before their second year, roughly thirty percent of these students were
leaving for academic reasons only. Therefore, other contributing factors have played into these students’ choices to leave their initial institutions. Past research has concluded that several academic and social factors have shown to significantly influence students’ persistence between the first and second years of college.

Information on academic achievement is common in the realm of higher education, and some authors have connected academic motivations with issues of retention for first-year students. The authors of this study revealed three focal areas through this literature review that could contribute to the persistence of first-year students to their second years of college. These areas were: the grade points received by first-year students, the time first-year students spent or planned on spending on their academics, and the first-year student participation in learning communities.

McGrath and Braunstein (1995) found that one of the most significant predictors of first-year student retention was the first semester grade points of freshmen students. Though McGrath and Braunstein did not find significance among time spent on studies and freshmen persistence, time spent on academics could be linked to grade point achievement. According to these authors, it could be sustained that the outcomes of grade points typically reflect academic effort.

Many authors have found that there seems to be a significant connection to first-year student participation in learning communities and retention of those students. Goodsell Love defined a learning community as something that had collective goals, typically with an academic focus, for all participating members to strive for (1999). Contributing members of learning communities could be identified as fellow students, faculty, administration, along with alumni. These learning communities were constructed with the ideas of bridging the academic and social gaps of first-year students to help students succeed in their first year in college. Goodsell Love
continued by stating that for traditional-aged students, social integration needed to develop concurrently with academic integration so students could feel well-adjusted to their new surroundings. Learning communities have allowed this congruent development of academic and social motivations, and could be considered to encourage persistence among first-year students.

The level to which a student is socially integrated into a college or university is a strong predictor in determining their level of satisfaction with the institution. A student that is highly satisfied with their institution is more likely to continue at that particular institution. Conversely, if a student is not happy at the institution they are more likely to leave. (Kennedy, Gordon, & Gordon, 1995).

The literature identifies three major social factors that contribute to the persistence of first year students. The first factor is the need for first year students to develop supportive interpersonal relationships. This includes relationships with peers as well as faculty and staff. Most freshmen do not transition seamlessly into their college culture, regardless of their high school background and academic interests. Frost (1993) ascertained that students who did not form supportive peer relationships within their first year at the institution were less likely to return for their sophomore year at the institution. Building relationships with friends in and outside of the academic arena will increase a student’s satisfaction with the institution and ultimately retain them for a second year.

When new students arrive at college they are many times leaving behind high school friends and the comforts of home. Therefore, it can be difficult for new students to quickly develop close friendships. The second social factor that affects student persistence is becoming involved in extracurricular activities such as social organizations, clubs, and athletic teams.
Involvement in the context of this study can be defined as the level of one’s participation in his/her academic and social development. The more socially involved students are, the more likely they are to persist to their second year. The impact of involvement upon persistence is especially crucial during the first ten weeks of college when the transition to college is not yet complete and personal affiliations have not yet cemented (Tinto, 1998). Hence, many first year students are encouraged to join organizations and clubs their first semester of college.

The third social factor investigated in past literature was the impact that comfort and satisfaction with a student’s environment has on persistence. A study done by Kennedy, Gordon and Gordon (1995), determined that persistence rates are frequently dependent on how comfortable a student is at his/her respective institution. Kennedy, Gordon, and Gordon demonstrated that in order to become fully socially integrated, a student must be able to consider his/her college environment a suitable fit for his/her individual needs (1995).

Methodology

Each of the aforementioned factors will be taken into consideration for the purposes of this study. Descriptive statistics will be used to analyze and interpret the data the study generated. For purposes of this study, again, a first year student is defined as new, first-time entering student at a four-year, public institution in the Midwest being of traditional age. This will be the population for this study as well as the sample, because each incoming first-year student will be contacted to participate in the survey. Because each first-year student has the opportunity to participate in the study, the sampling technique is considered random. Out of the approximate 4000 incoming first-year students, the authors expect a return rate of about 12.5%, or about 500 student replies.
The authors will obtain the names and email addresses of all incoming first-year students from the Office of Registration and Records. A web-based survey will be attached to the emails the researchers send the first-year students with a letter of explanation. The survey will also be located on the university’s homepage as a link. To ensure that only first year students are able to fill out the survey from the university homepage, random numbers will be included on the initial email. The researchers will ask all participating first-year students to copy and paste the number to the appropriate box on the survey, therefore insuring confidentiality along with a method of tracking which students turned in completed surveys. The survey will have a submission button at the bottom of the page that will allow students to directly submit their answers and not have to email them to the researchers so they will not have to forego their anonymity. This submission button will log what time and date the survey was returned and will not allow the survey to be submitted without the number in the email. The survey will be distributed to incoming first-year students in the Fall of 2000, and again in the Fall of 2001, to determine factors that attributed to these students’ attrition at the institution.

The survey’s results will be discussed and analyzed with the assistance of the Director of Institutional Research as well as the Director of the First Year Experience Programs at the institution where the study is taking place, contributing to the validity of the study. The Associate Director of Higher Education in Student Affairs will also be assisting with the analyzation and interpretation of the data. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient will be used to determine internal consistency to test the reliability of the study.

The researchers created the instrument used for the purposes of this study. The following is the survey used to determine persistence rates based on academic and social factors. Many of the questions were mostly based on a Likert-type scale with a few yes/no questions and fill-in-
the-blanks, as well. Questions from Fall 2000 to Fall 2001 would change slightly, as noted in italic type and indented. Otherwise, all questions will be asked of students during both survey times.

Are you a first-year, first-semester student?  Y  N
Are you a second-year, first-semester student?  Y  N
How many academic credit hours are you currently enrolled in?  _______

Of the following questions, please put an X next to the number you most identify with based on the following criteria:

1 – Overly Satisfied
2 – Satisfied
3 – Indifferent
4 – Dissatisfied
5 – Overly Dissatisfied

- Your academic experience as a whole 1 2 3 4 5
- Your relationships with faculty 1 2 3 4 5
- Your relationships with administrative staff members 1 2 3 4 5
- Your relationship with your peers 1 2 3 4 5
- The academic workload expected of you 1 2 3 4 5
- The number of places to study on campus 1 2 3 4 5
- The availability of academic support services (ie: tutors, computer labs, libraries, etc.) 1 2 3 4 5
- The availability of personal support services (ie: Counseling Staff, Health Center, etc.) 1 2 3 4 5
- If you are an on-campus resident: your residence hall experience as a whole 1 2 3 4 5
- If you are an off-campus resident: the support network for off-campus students 1 2 3 4 5
- The number of student organizations available on campus 1 2 3 4 5
- Access to membership of student organizations 1 2 3 4 5
- The level of school spirit and tradition on campus 1 2 3 4 5
- The level of social programming on campus 1 2 3 4 5

Returning students in Fall 2001 will be asked to check as many of the above 12 factors that applied to their return to the institution.

Were you a part of a learning community?  Y  N
- If so, was your experience: (place an X next to the number you most identify with)
  1 – incredibly positive
  2 – positive
  3 – neutral
  4 – negative
  5 – incredibly negative
- If so, did you feel a strong connection between your academics and your social life because of your membership in a learning community?  Y  N

How many hours on the average do you study a day? 1-2 3-4 5-6 7+
How many student organizations are you a part of? 1-2 3-4 5-6 7+
Do you feel that being a part of a student organization(s) has helped you to meet new people? 1 – Strongly agree
An added incentive would be included with the survey to help increase participation. If the survey is completely filled out and returned within seven days of the initial email, those students’ numbers will be placed in a drawing for a gift certificate and the winning student will be contacted by the researchers after the data is compiled in the Fall of 2000. Should the winning student choose to participate with the follow-up survey in the Fall of 2001, they will again be eligible for winning another certificate, along with all the participating students in Fall, 2001.

Statistics will help to identify which academic and social factors contribute to the retention and persistence of first-year students. Means and standard deviations will be the main descriptive statistical interpretation of the collected data, as well as percentile ranks. Because many variables (multiple academic and social factors) are being considered for this study the authors would have to perform ANOVA statistics to uncover the inferential worth of this data. The alpha level for this study would be set at .05.
References


