

Sustaining College Students' persistence and achievement through exemplary instructional strategies

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Abstract:

A “take it or leave it” attitude has no place in higher education. Society needs an educated citizenry to sustain and advance its technological and global mission. Too few students are entering college and ever fewer than might reasonably be expected are graduating. Retention and graduation rates serve as key indicators of performance for institutions of higher education (Titus, 2004). This study examined the literature to present an update on student persistence and related areas of concern, and ascertained instructional strategies of high promise for sustaining persistence and enhancing achievement of college students. Special attention was given to strategies thought to be effective for minority students attending historically black colleges and universities. This area of study was expanded by development of a practical list of things that faculty and students might do to improve students' persistence and increase their achievement level. While governmental agencies and other stakeholders have significant roles to play in the retention and education of college students, faculty and students must make sure that the classroom experience is as efficient and effective as possible.

Keywords: college persistence, graduation rates, responsive teaching, student achievement, student motivation

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities are being held accountable for retention and graduation rates by state and federal policy makers. States use the data as performance indicators and the federal government is considering linking them to eligibility for federal student financial aid programs (Titus, 2004). In such a position, institutions of higher learning need to know about conditions that influence student retention and achievement. The “take it or leave it” attitude is not sufficient. Dropping out of school/college has negative consequences for the individual student and impedes economic prosperity (Farid-ul-Hasnain & Krantz, 2011).

Access to higher education for American students has improved in recent years, but student persistence in 4-year institutions remains a concern (Chen, 2012). Student success and student learning outcomes from college are two very visible issues that attract attention from policy makers, institutional administrators, and researchers. The historically low rate of college completion has made student success a longstanding interest of educational researchers (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea, 2012; Wang, 2009).

Few areas in the field of higher education have attracted as much attention as student persistence (Hu & Ma, 2010). One of the best known models on college student persistence is the integration model proposed by Tinto (1975). In the Tinto model, academic integration and social integration are the two key constructs to conceptualize student attrition. The academic system focuses on academic affairs of the college; and the social system component focuses on the daily lives and personal needs of the various members of the institution. The extent to which students integrate into both systems of the college is important for them to persist and succeed at the college (Hu & Ma, 2010). From Tinto’s model, dropout is viewed as the result of two major failures: lack of integration into the social life of the institution and/or insufficient compatibility with the academic demands. Thus, dropout is more likely to occur among students who fail to establish membership in the college’s social community or who fall short with the prevailing values and intellectual norms of the college (Lee & Choi, 2011).

Further elaborating on Tinto’s model and other frameworks for studying student persistence, Hu, McCormick, and Gonyea (2012) think that such models help to enrich the understanding of student persistence in college and shed light upon institutional policies and practices. Titus (2004) thinks that such models recognize the influence of student peer group climate on individual outcomes. Chen (2012) thinks that the models provide an inclusive view of the student dropout process by integrating psychological, social, and organizational perspectives and emphasize the impact of dynamic, reciprocal interaction between the environment and individuals. The author’s main point is that experiences promoting students’ social and intellectual integration into college communities will probably strengthen their commitment and reduce dropout risk. Boyraz et al. (2013) concluded from study of the models that student departure suggests that student persistence and retention are greatly determined by students’ precollege characteristics (e.g., family background, academic preparedness, and prior skills and abilities).

Hartley (2011) concluded from the study of Tinto's theory of student departure that academic persistence is an interplay between the student and his/her ability to integrate academically (referring to the student's motivation to attend class and study) and socially (referring to the student's subjective sense of fitting into the university). The author felt that there is clear evidence that academic and social integration shape college retention. Hu and Ma (2010) also felt that social integration into the academic and social communities of the college is positively related to the likelihood of persistence and that faculty academic advising of students can contribute to academic integration into the college system. The author further felt that faculty mentoring can contribute to alleviating the sense of alienation and isolation and meet the need for adjustment and support for underrepresented and at-risk students

Titus (2004) studied the research on college persistence and gathered that it often explored the predictors of persistence but not the relationship between the institutional context and persistence, ignoring the effect of student variables operating within institutions on institutional persistence rates. This study is keen on the relationship between the student and the professor on persistence rates. Principal tenets from Tinto's theory and other frameworks will be used to make the case of the impact of faculty and students working together to enhance persistence and achievement.

School dropout is a major challenge for American schools and its effects are devastating to the victims, their families, and to society. There is a need to gain a clear understanding of the problem and to initiate promising strategies and plans for its resolution. The problem can be better understood by investigating researched reasons for school dropout, the magnitude of the problem, key demographics of the picture, and the impact of the problem on the individual, family, and society. Attention should also be given to efforts that are in place to reduce school dropout and identifying strategies and procedures that are most effective in resolving the problem.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this manuscript was to document the magnitude of students discontinuing college and the various demographics associated with it; and to analyze noted persistent plans, programs, and strategies to extrapolate what faculty and students might best do to minimize the probability of students leaving college before graduation. Emphasis was placed on strategies that can be implemented and made part of normal school functioning. It was felt that when school efforts are added to greater society's commitment to education and improvement in socio-economic conditions, college dropout may be drastically reduced. This manuscript endeavored to provide faculty and students the tools with which to work in accomplishing the task

The major question for this study was: What can faculty and students do to enhance persistence and achievement in college? Many studies have examined broad perspectives of persistence such as financial aid policies (Chen & St. John, 2011; Mckinney & Novak, 2013); need-based grants (Alon, 2011); choice of college major (Allen & Robbins, 2008); assignment of college mentor (Hu & Ma, 2010); supplemental instruction (Oja, 2012); community college

transfer (Wang, 2009); high school affluence and persistence (Niu & Tienda, 2012); and minorities and persistence (Boyras et al., 2013). A few studies have examined the relationship between student learning and persistence (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea, 2012); student engagement and persistence (Hu, 2011); and resilience and persistence (Hartley, (2011).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The opportunity to attend college is an important milestone for students and an added value for society. Though beginning college is often a positive development in students' lives, the transition to college does not come without its own challenges and many students fail to complete the course (Boyras et al., 2013). This part of the literature review explored the magnitude and impact of students not completing college and problems and issues associated with completing college.

Magnitude and Impact for Discontinuing College

Most students enter college expecting to graduate in 4 years, national data showed that approximately one fifth to one quarter of college students drop out at the end of their freshmen year and only 53.4% earn a bachelor's degree within 5 years (Chen, 2012). Another study reported that only 51 percent of incoming students at four-year institutions complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Allen & Robbins, 2008). College graduation rate has hovered around 50% for decades (Hu, 2011). Young adults from poor families are at increased risk of dropping out of school/college in such countries as Pakistan, for economic reasons. Dropping out of school may lead to inappropriate life styles which result in behavior problems, conduct disorders, or illicit drug use. Some students also face difficult problems due to lack of education, gender inequality and cultural constraints, such as problems in discussing personal matters with their parents (Farid-ul-Hasnain & Krantz, 2011). Evidence suggests that stress interferes with the academic performance of about one third of the college population and since it is difficult to eliminate all college stressors, it is important to examine how students cope (Hartley, (2011).

The imperative to improve college persistence and degree completion is compelling from the standpoint of individual students, institutions, states, and society as a whole. Years of college attended and degree completion are associated with increased individual and societal benefits, both economic and non-economic (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea, 2012). In the United States there is a stark inequality in the attainment of a bachelor's degree: students from the top of the family income distribution are substantially more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than students from the bottom. Low-income students are not only less likely to enroll in college than economically privileged students, but they are also less likely to attain a bachelor's degree, even after successfully navigating most of the postsecondary pipeline. A report on the study of students, who began college in 1992 showed that only 40 percent of those in the bottom income quartile graduated, compared to 72 percent of those in the top quartile (Alon, 2011).

Key statistics on college attendance and its impact showed that in 2012, employment rates were higher for adults with a bachelor's degree than for those without a bachelor's degree. Some 33 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds had completed a bachelor's degree or higher credential, with female attainment rates higher than male attainment rates. In 2011, adults with a bachelor's degree earned twice as much as those without a high school diploma or its equivalent and approximately 21 percent of school-age children in the United States were in families living in poverty, with the percentage having increased. After an increase in the recent decade, in 2011 some 18.1 million undergraduate students were enrolled, a decrease of less than 1 percent from 2010. About 59 percent of full-time, first-time students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution in fall 2005 completed that degree within 6 years, 61 percent females, 56 percent males (Aud et. al, 2013).

Postsecondary education has long been considered one of the surest ways to overcome underprivileged social conditions. Individuals with at least a bachelor's degree consistently have much higher median earnings than those with less education. The outcome of higher education not only shapes economic returns, but also determines the quality of life (Wang, 2009).

Problems and Issues in Completing College

There is an array of problems and issues associated with students' persistence and achievement in college. Titus (2004) studied student persistence and concluded: (1) persistence is positively influenced by student academic background, college academic performance, involvement, and institutional commitment; (2) differences exist between colleges in persistence even after controlling for student-level predictors; and (3) selectivity has a contextual positive effect on college student persistence. The author also found that college student persistence is influenced by both student- and institution-level variables.

One study examined variation in college persistence according to economic composition of their high schools. Students who graduated from affluent high schools have the highest persistence rates and those who attended poor high schools have the lowest rates. High school college orientation, family background and pre-college academic preparation largely explain why graduates from affluent high schools who first enroll in 2-year colleges have higher transfer rates to 4-year institutions (Niu & Tienda, 2012).

One study focused on institutional characteristics that contribute to conditions that reduce student dropout risks. It was found that institutional expenditure on student services was negatively associated with student dropout behavior (Chen, 2012). In light of organizational theory relationships can be examined between institutional characteristics and student dropout decisions. For example, the percentage of minority students in an institution is positively associated with dropout; size and selectivity are both negatively related to student dropout; in terms of institutional control, higher retention rates exist in private institutions; the percentage of courses taught by part-time faculty is negatively related to retention rates; schools with higher student-teacher ratio tend to have higher dropout rates; but it is not clear how expenditure on instruction is related to student persistence/dropout (Chen, 2012).

Allen and Robbins (2008) hypothesized that college major persistence would be predicted by first-year academic performance and an interest-major composite score. They found academic performance and interest-major fit to be key constructs for understanding major persistence behavior. Students who choose a major congruent with their skills and interests are more likely to succeed and persist in that major and in college. Another long-standing issue in U.S. higher education is the quality of undergraduate education. At least 40% of its students showed little if any gains on a broad assessment student learning outcomes (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea, 2012).

Higher education's mission is to prepare students to participate as global citizens. Thus, there is a need for educators to promote civic engagement.. An emphasis on action helps to bridge students' academic and personal lives, which is key in deep learning (Allen, 2011). One study examined the relationships between student learning outcomes, e.g., college grades, and student persistence and found that students' GPA had the largest explanatory power in student persistence, followed by self-reported gains (Hu, McCormick, & Gonyea, 2012).

The ways in which financial aid influences persistence in state systems has become an issue of increasing importance. Traditionally, state funds for higher education were mostly allocated to public institutions to maintain low tuition for students and promote equal access. States are now shifting from a low-tuition policy to one based on the notion of cost-sharing between the states and students and their families, using need-based aid to equalize opportunity (Chen & St. John, (2011).

In terms of need-based grants, it is only the persistence of students from the bottom half of the income distribution that is sensitive to aid amounts. For a redistribution of funds to boost degree attainment and achieve equality of educational opportunity it must be based on stricter mean-tested allocations of nonfederal funds as they are the main source of need-based aid. Family financial resources are critical to the year-to-year persistence and degree attainment of economically disadvantaged students. Policy that adequately addresses economic inequality among students is imperative. Since the late 1970s, not only have wage and wealth inequality risen, but tuition levels have also soared (Alon, 2011).

One study examined the relationship between Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) filing status and persistence. Filing a FAFSA was associated with higher odds of with-year persistence among all students. The underutilization of financial aid has been identified as a formidable barrier to access, persistence, and degree attainment among community college students. Some 42% of community college students who were eligible to receive federal Pell-grant funding did not file a FAFSA (McKinney & Novak, 2013).

The probability of community college transfer students attaining a bachelor's degree is significantly associated with gender, SES, high school curriculum, educational expectation upon entering college, GPA earned from community colleges, college involvement, and math remediation. Perceived locus of control and community college GPA are significant predictors of persistence (Wang, 2009). Literature points to the negative effect of ever attending community colleges on bachelor's degree attainment, compared with similar students entering a four-year college or university (Wang, 2009).

Online learning is expanding in availability and popularity, but there are high dropout rates that present a challenging problem. One study identified 69 factors that influence students' decisions to dropout and classified into three main categories: (a) Student factors, (b) Course/Program factors, and (c) Environmental factors. It then examined the strategies proposed to overcome those dropout factors: (a) understanding each student's challenges and potential, (b) providing quality course activities and well-structured supports, and (c) handling environmental issues and emotional challenges (Lee & Choi, 2011). Online courses have significantly higher student dropout rates than conventional courses. Failure to complete their first online course may lead to lower students' self-confidence or self-esteem and discourage them from registering for other online courses (Lee & Choi, 2011).

One study examined the relationship between posttraumatic stress disorder and college persistence in African Americans. Higher levels of PTSD increased likelihood of leaving college prior to the end of the 2nd year of college. Being a student at a predominantly White institution and entering college with low high school GPA were identified as risk factors for low academic achievement and college dropout; involvement in on-campus activities and higher levels of perceived academic integration in the 1st semester were associated with higher 1st-year GPA (Boyratz et al., 2013).

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES TO SUSTAIN STUDENT PERSISTENCE AND ACHIEVEMENT

Because dropping out is influenced by both individual and institutional factors, intervention strategies can focus on either or both sets of factors. In essence, strategies can address the individual's values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with dropping out; or they may focus on altering the characteristics of the families, schools, and communities that contribute to dropping out of school. Common features among effective programs are (1) nonthreatening environment for learning, (2) caring and committed staff who accept a personal responsibility for student success, (3) school culture that encourages staff risk-taking, self-governance, and professional collegiality, and (4) school structure that provides for a low student-teacher ratio and a small class size to promote student engagement (Rumberger, 2006b).

Few studies have focused on what colleges can do to create conditions that foster student persistence. What colleges can do to reduce student dropout risk is a pressing issue in higher education. There is a need for greater understanding about how the college environment affects students (Chen, 2012). For example, one study found that when students are actively involved in classroom discussions, this positively enhances graduation and retention rates (AlKandari, 2012).

College students' learning can be significantly increased through effective classroom communication. This is best achieved through activities that involve them academically and socially with both faculty and peers. The activities may include discussion, dialogue, debate, group work, and presentations (AlKandari, 2012). AlKandari (2012) reported that a comfortable classroom atmosphere begins with the faculty being open and friendly and interested in students'

success; and most students perceived that their professors do have concern in terms of listening to students' responses, dialogue, and experiences.

Effective instruction reduces negative student behaviors (i.e., calling out, interrupting instruction, off-task) and increases student academic outcomes (i.e., correct responses, active student responses, quiz scores (Haydon & Hunter, 2011).

Lee and Choi (2011) identified 69 factors that influence students' decision to dropout and classified them into three main categories: (a) Student factors, (b) Course/Program factors, and (c) Environmental factors. From these authors' work and other literature, a framework was established to reflect what faculty can do and what students can do to facilitate persistence and achievement.

Optimism and wisdom are the primary traits that need to be nurtured so that individuals feel empowered to act in positive ways. Other traits equally important are curiosity, initiative, persistence, and resilience (Allen, 2011). It is important to nurture the emotional-motivational-personal core of the individual to achieve success (Allen, 2011). Experiences that build upon students' strengths and provide a sense of purpose, exactly what is hoped for in civic engagement, could help support these undergraduates as they face the open-endedness of entering the "real world" (Allen, 2011).

One study found that having an assigned college mentor was positively related to the probability of persisting in college. Also, those who had an assigned college mentor, the probability of persisting was positively associated with extent to which the recipients turn to mentors for support and encouragement and with their perceived importance of experiences with mentors (Hu & Ma, 2010).

Supplemental instruction is a growing student support service used to offer students peer-guided activities to improve course learning or grades. One study showed that it improved grades but not persistence. However, other reports showed that it yielded higher persistence rates. Prior GPA is one of the strongest predictors of student success; those who have been successful in the past tend to continue to be successful. GPA was the primary contributor to explaining continued student attendance at the college, persistence (Oja, 2012).

One study investigated student engagement in college activities and student persistence in college. Higher level of social engagement was related to an increased probability of persisting, a higher level of academic engagement was negatively related to such probability (Hu, 2011). Student success is becoming one of the central issues in higher education. A look is taken of in- and out-of-class activities that can contribute to student learning and personal development (Hu, 2011).

College dropout is a challenge in America. It was reported that only 60 percent of college students are obtaining their degrees; or a mere 38 percent of African Americans are graduating from college. Some of the reasons for low graduation rates included lack of academic preparedness, poor economic preparedness, and certain psychosocial variables. Transitioning to college from high school can be anxiety provoking. The psychosocial variables include such factors as separation from familiar environments, lack of primary support network, and limited areas of expertise. These factors can create a significant disruption in the lives of new college

students. Intervention aimed at ameliorating psychosocial distresses would especially be beneficial in assisting African American college students to succeed academically. What happens to students after they arrive on campus has a greater influence on academic and social self-concepts than does the kind of institution students attend (Henderson & Kritsonis, 2007). It was observed that older students and students who delay entry into higher education were more likely to drop out before graduating. These matters as well as other family characteristics are particularly significant factors in explaining student drop out in long programs (Lassibille & Gomez, 2008).

One college professor was endeavoring to make teaching and learning a true adventure. Numerous teaching strategies aimed at making learning authentic and relevant, establishing functional rapport, embedding essential competencies in instructional material, influencing self-determination to accentuate achievement, and employing methods of motivation were brought together into a framework (Gentry, 2007). Notable results were observed in terms of class attendance, purchase and use of the textbook, completion of all course assignments, participation in field-based experiences, and overall grade achievement. Equally noticeable were the enhanced demeanor that the candidates had about the teaching profession and the feelings that they displayed as persons. The author reported that attending college had taken on new meaning when former students called his name so fondly while walking down the corridor, waved from the hallway while he was teaching in a classroom, or gave to him a shoutout from a distance on campus. The student-teacher framework led to the development of a list of things that both students and teachers can do to be effective in the college environment.

Based on a review of current literature, it was established that there are specific things that faculty can do and there are specific things that students can do to sustain student persistence and achievement in college. The detailed findings are reported in Table 1 (Appendix). In summary, faculty can; and students can

To put researched evidence on school dropout in perspective, effort was put forth to develop a list of things that both students and teachers can do to reduce school dropout. This would illustrate what an inspired student and a responsive teacher can do when they work together as two. Table 2 contains ten (10) very specific and poignant measures that students can take and ten (10) suggested steps that teachers can take to reduce school dropout.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Most students who enroll in college do so expecting to graduate in 4 years, but for many, their enrollment exceeds eight semesters. Research delineates both individual and institutional factors that lead to school dropout. The individual perspective focuses on attributes of the students including their values, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to their decisions to quit school. The institutional perspective focuses on the contextual factors found in students' families, schools, communities, and peers (Rumberger, 2006a)

This manuscript presented college persistence and achievement data and the particular impact that faculty and students can have on it when working together. Students often have the

ability to succeed in school but may need to be convinced that they can be successful. Teachers need to be empowered to orchestrate classroom climates conducive to meeting the demands of the whole child. If students and teachers do not actively seek to reduce school dropout, they may unwittingly contribute to it.

Very little energy has been put into addressing this problem, or even into producing accurate statistics on graduation levels (Orfield, 2006).

The transition to college is an important milestone for many young people. Though beginning college is often a positive development in students' lives, the transition to college does not come without its own stressors. Of incoming college students, 66% reported lifetime exposure to at least one Criterion A trauma (Boyratz et al., 2013). Trauma exposure and PTSD have been found to play a role in whether students remain enrolled in college. African American college students report higher rates of trauma exposure and PTSD in comparison to other groups. They also report greater perceived racial hostility, faculty racism, unequal treatment by faculty and staff, and more pressure to conform to racial stereotypes than White and Latina/o students (Boyratz et al., 2013).

Few areas in the field of higher education have attracted as much attention as student persistence. Researchers have developed persistence models that measure the effects of college experiences, including academic and social integration, on student persistence (Bean, Tinto) (Hu, 2011). Literature has indicated that what matters most in student learning is what students do in college both in and outside of class. The more the students are involved the more they gain from college (Hu, 2011).

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APPENDIX

Table 1

What students and faculty can do to facilitate persistence and achievement

Things professors can do to facilitate persistence and achievement

- Make the course relevant and interesting to motivate students (AlKandari, 2012; Allen, 2011; Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Be warm, open, and organized to create a feeling of belonging (AlKandari, 2012).
- Learn students' first names, talk after class, smile, praise their performance, and actively respond for positive faculty-student relationships (AlKandari, 2012).
- Provide a safe classroom climate to cope with stressors and encourage a sense of community (AlKandari, 2012).
- Use a variety of activities (discussion, group work, debate) to encourage participation (AlKandari, 2012).
- Strive to understand each student's challenges and potentials (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Ensure that students are comfortable with materials and teaching style (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Use a battery of assessment tools that can be scored immediately (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Offer a cohort- team-based learning experience (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Provide content which is relevant to students' experiences and interests (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Identify at-risk students and provide appropriate training opportunities and guidance (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Energize the emotional-motivational-personal core of the student for cognitive development (Allen, 2011).
- Provide concrete experiences for students to process deep learning (Allen, 2011).
- Provide experiences that build upon students' strengths and provide a sense of purpose (Allen, 2011).
- Engage students in "learning how to be" vs. "learning about" (Allen, 2011).
- Mentor/advise students to contribute to academic and social integration into the college system (Hu & Ma, 2010)

- Attend professional development workshops; stay on top of your game;
- Accept it as a challenge to teach at-risk students; they may be diamonds in the rough;
- If all else fails, smile a lot; students will think you like them and your job (Buskist & Bryan, n.d.).

- Consider both ability and attitude, skill and will, of teacher candidates (Gebhard, 2007);

- Show leadership, scholarship, and compassion in working with students;

Things students can do to facilitate persistence and achievement

- Participate in class discussion to make for an enriched environment (AlKandari, 2012).
- Use technology to facilitate and promote peer interaction (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Self-monitor involvement and progress in learning activities (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Take advantage of faculty feedback and interaction (Lee & Choi, 2011).
- Seek the services of a regarded faculty as a mentor (Hu & Ma, 2010).
- Seek faculty role models to facilitate academic and social integration into the college system (Hu & Ma, 2010).
- Learn/prepare to cope with the social and emotional demands of college (Hartley, (2011).
- Cultivate a sense of belonging (Hartley, (2011).
- Strive for high cumulative GPA (Hartley, (2011).
- Socialize and participate in group activities and student organizations (Hartley, (2011).
- Learn to “strive in the face of adversity” (Hartley, (2011).

- Decide on a certain grade for each assignment; then, set out to earn it;
- Learn good study and test taking skills
- Reward yourself for school accomplishments; a movie, favorite food, anything wholesome.

- Show Commitment in their teacher preparation program:
 - Attend all classes and complete all course requirements; and
 - Study hard and smart; find a good study place, allow ample study time, study ahead of time.*
- Seek the highest level of Achievement in course requirements:
 - Set academic goals for each test and for the final course grade;* and
 - Read smart and wisely; scan the material, read it, review what you have read.*
- Show Enthusiasm in all engagements and relationships:
 - Believe in yourself; have a positive attitude and see yourself succeeding;* and
 - Be an active learner; listen, think, and respond to class presentations and discussions.

* (Student Planner, 2007 - 2008).