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## The why behind their leaving : a look at student retention

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## The why behind their leaving : a look at student retention

### Abstract

Colleges faced with the threat of declining enrollments are examining options to continue their existence. An option which has always existed, but has frequently been overlooked, is the retention of currently enrolled students. As the quest for students becomes more critical, the option of retention becomes more obvious. It is apparent why retention of students is being given serious consideration at college campuses across the country. Tinto (1987) estimated that of 2.8 million students who entered college in 1986 as freshmen, over 1.6 million (57%) would leave their initial college without completing a degree. Of those nonpersisters, approximately 1.2 million (75%) would never return to complete a college degree.

THE WHY BEHIND THEIR LEAVING:

A LOOK AT STUDENT RETENTION

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by

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Colleges faced with the threat of declining enrollments are examining options to continue their existence. An option which has always existed, but has frequently been overlooked, is the retention of currently enrolled students. As the quest for students becomes more critical, the option of retention becomes more obvious.

It is apparent why retention of students is being given serious consideration at college campuses across the country. Tinto (1987) estimated that of 2.8 million students who entered college in 1986 as freshmen, over 1.6 million (57%) would leave their initial college without completing a degree. Of those nonpersisters, approximately 1.2 million (75%) would never return to complete a college degree.

College administrators have become cognizant of the fact that retaining currently enrolled students is not only more economical than recruiting new students, but it also has a positive impact on the public image of the college. Thus, in the last two decades, there has been a substantial increase in research concerning the retention of college students.

Many retention studies have focused on the readily available demographic information or on only one

variable, an oversimplified approach to a complex problem. A number of factors appear to be involved in a student's decision to withdraw from college.

Murdock (1987) cautioned that we must be careful, when compiling retention statistics, to define the groups to which the results apply. With today's heterogeneous college students, it is not uncommon for students to stop out temporarily or transfer to a different institution to complete a degree. If those students are included in the attrition statistics, the retention studies are presenting an inaccurate portrayal of the situation. Thus, to produce accurate retention data, it is necessary to know what the individual student's goals are in enrolling at a specific institution. If, in fact, the student's goal is to enroll in one Business Management course to move up the ranks at his/her place of employment, this student must be evaluated in a different manner than the student who enters the institution with a goal of leaving with a B.A. degree in Business Management. It should also be evident that a student's goals could change over a period of time. This, too, must be considered if the most accurate retention statistics at a given

college or university are to be presented.

Research has shown that the majority of college departures are voluntary. Tinto (1987) found that student withdrawal from college because of academic failure accounts for less than 15% of total withdrawals. Similarly, Stodt (1987) found that students are more likely to withdraw for personal rather than academic reasons. Evidently, personal and nonacademic factors are the key to student retention.

Tinto (1988) identified three stages in student departure: 1) separation, 2) transition, and 3) incorporation. The characteristics of these three stages are elaborated below. The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship of social integration, academic advising, academic achievement, and student financial aid to Tinto's incorporation stage, the most critical determinant of student persistence.

#### STAGES OF STUDENT DEPARTURE

There is some indication that the factors which influence a decision to leave college during the initial six weeks of enrollment may be vastly different from those which affect a decision to leave in the

later years of college. The first six months of college are particularly crucial in student persistence; students who return for a second year of college are well on their way to completing the degree.

### Separation

College students are generally moving from a safe and familiar community into a somewhat unknown community. Tinto (1988) likened this to the transition one makes in moving from one locale to another.

After initial enrollment in college, new students have to deal with the separation from their past. To varying degrees, they must disassociate themselves from the communities where they spent their formative years. This disassociation can be a physical move as well as a social move for the new college students. For many, it is the first time they have been away from their high school, hometown, and family. Their new environment, quite often, is decidedly different. They find themselves in a position where they must leave their former communities and become integrated into their new communities within the college.

Some students will remain in their original communities and perhaps even live with their family.



They may be able to maintain ties with the local community while establishing membership in the new college community. This group of students may find the adjustment less stressful, in some ways, than the traditional resident student. At the same time, the college experience may be less rewarding for the nonresident students. They may find that they do not enjoy the complete rewards of belonging to a college community. So even though they experience an easier transition, they may suffer a greater struggle over time.

#### Transition

The transition period is a time when students have separated themselves from their past communities, but have not yet acquired behavior that is appropriate in the new college community. It is a time of passage between the old and the new. During this time, the students may feel in limbo, as they are not strongly tied to either group. One's ability to deal with the transition will be directly influenced by the degree of difference between the two environments.

#### Incorporation

The final stage, incorporation, revolves primarily around social interactions. The students make contact

with other students and faculty members of the institution. They "learn the ropes" of their new communities and choose to participate or to remain outside of the new communities. Choosing to stay outside of the new communities, i.e., choosing not to incorporate, lessens their desire to stay in college.

It is apparent, from the descriptions of the various stages through which a student must pass, that there are periods in which a student is more vulnerable to withdrawal from college. Retention programs should be targeted at periods early in the students' college careers to enable them to reach the goal of incorporation within the college communities. Retention programs implemented later will, in many cases, be too late. If no organized programs are presented to incorporate the students, they may be left on their own to figure out their new environment.

Specific areas which should be addressed early in the students' college careers, factors which have a positive impact on incorporating the college students in to the college community, include social integration, academic advising, academic achievement,

and student financial aid. Dealing positively with these factors can influence students' decisions to remain in college.

### Social Integration and Retention

The degree and quality of personal interaction with other members of the institution are critical factors in student persistence. The decision to leave college reflects the character of the individual's social and intellectual experiences within the institution. The more integrated the students have become, the more likely they are to persist. Conversely, the less integrated they feel, the more likely they are to withdraw before completing their degree (Tinto, 1987). Persistence mirrors the degree to which those experiences have helped to incorporate the student into the social and intellectual college environment.

Factors cited by Stodt (1987) which contribute to satisfaction with college, student involvement, and integration are student interaction with faculty, building of student friendships, and residing on campus. Stodt also advocated on-campus, part-time employment to promote involvement with the college.

Astin (1984) indicated that not just

organizations, student government, and athletics can promote satisfaction with college. Virtually anything that brings students to campus, keeps them there, and fosters interaction with other people tends to increase student satisfaction with the college.

Feelings of isolation result when there are insufficient social and academic contacts between the student and other members of the college community. Feelings of isolation are instrumental in a student's decision to leave college. Students develop a sense of belonging as a result of many and varied interactions with the college and student environment (Stodt, 1987).

Whereas residential colleges naturally provide more opportunities for student interactions, commuter colleges must provide space and resources to address the needs of social integration for the commuting students. Recognizing that it is an institution-wide concern that students be encouraged to feel a part of the system, college employees can do their share by treating students courteously and providing assistance to students when the need arises. Simple gestures such as these can make the student feel at home within the college community from the first time

he/she sets foot on the campus (Dayton & Doucette, 1989).

### Academic Advising and Retention

Academic advising must go beyond helping students make appropriate choices to helping them make realistic plans to achieve their goals. This work should begin prior to enrollment, during the recruiting process. The advisor can work cooperatively with the admissions officer in assisting the students to examine the appropriateness of their educational/vocational choices.

Students need assistance with planning, setting, and incorporating academic, social, and career goals. Advisors can guide students to make decisions which, in turn, can lead to a higher level of satisfaction. By beginning this process early in their college choice process, students are quickly incorporated into the institutional system. The students will be better equipped to understand and prepare realistically for their academic programs. Baer and Carr (1985) concluded that realistic expectations about academic life are critical in longterm retention of students.

Baer and Carr (1985) suggested that the role of the academic advisor can no longer be limited to

that of information provider. They view the role of the academic advisor as one of catalyst, a resource person who facilitates the interaction between the student and the academic environment. Solid academic advising enables the student to be knowledgeable about the institution, to implement an educational program which will lead to academic success and degree completion.

The advisor can use SAT or ACT scores to determine basic facts about the students, but, through discussions with the students, the advisor can often find more significant information. From this additional information, the advisor can help the students make realistic academic and personal plans, thus helping to incorporate the students into the academic institution.

The advisor can help students put into perspective aspects of campus life beyond the classroom learning experience. Cooperative education programs, leadership positions in student activities, and special projects in academic departments provide opportunities for students to gain valuable educational experiences outside of the classroom. By making students aware of these options, the academic advisor assists the

student in utilizing all resources available at the academic institution.

Academic advising presents a situation where a one-to-one communication system can be implemented. Maintaining a continual communication system between the advisor and the students helps the latter to become incorporated into the college community. Students desire meaningful interactions with college community members (Baer & Carr, 1985). Thus, the interaction between students and academic advisors can be especially important in improving retention rates.

A study at Western New Mexico University (Glennen & Baxley, 1985) revealed that students who became attrition statistics were primarily freshmen and sophomores who: a) had not received enough individual attention, b) were in need of developmental programs, c) were confused about degree requirements and how to meet those requirements, and d) were not inclined to take advantage of programs and services available to them. Following this study, Western New Mexico University implemented an advisement program which the students were required to utilize. The intrusive advisement program proactively worked with students rather than waiting until students were struggling

with academic difficulties.

The results of this program verified that contact with an academic advisor gave the students a feeling of security and support. This feeling of incorporation allowed them to pursue their academic programs in a comfortable atmosphere.

Academic advising at Buffalo State utilized the faculty in making early academic assessments of their students (Ferguson, 1990). Buffalo State staff believed that faculty members were in the best position to identify academic problems of students at an early stage. When faculty found students with some academic difficulties, students were referred to the appropriate student services department for assistance. Thus, the faculty were the focus of the early retention program.

Buffalo State gained positive results from its faculty-centered early intervention system. The study concluded that the effort to retain students through academic advising is one in which many players must be involved. By using the faculty early in the students' college careers, students with difficulties were able to seek out assistance before the problem escalated. Feelings of incorporation were also



nurtured as the students became familiar with a faculty member and the variety of support services available on campus.

### Academic Achievement and Retention

Academic achievement is the benchmark of success in higher education; poor grades warrant dismissal in most colleges. Because high grades are the criteria for admission to most graduate and professional schools, college grades continue to be valued as an important measure of student achievement in college.

A minimum requirement for continuance at most colleges is the achievement of satisfactory grades. Students failing to meet the minimum standards may voluntarily withdraw to avoid being labeled a "failure". The student who fails academically usually has lower test scores and lower high school grades than the typical persister (Astin, 1977). Aitken (1987) found a high correlation between previous academic performance and persistence in college.

Academic achievement is related to the variables of incorporation. Typically, the academically-talented student has better opportunities to be involved with

research or honors programs and organizations. Scholarships are more likely given to well-prepared academic achievers. Since student involvement and scholarships were found to be positive retention factors, it would indicate that the academically well-prepared student would be more likely to persist than the student of lower ability (Stodt, 1987).

The retention model of Billson and Terry (1987) suggested academic troubleshooting for new students or those in trouble academically. An academic and social support system was deemed critical for retention, particularly with students identified as needing special support. They found that academic departments could greatly enhance student integration and retention through activities such as social functions for major/minors.

#### Financial Assistance and Retention

With large numbers of students receiving some form of financial assistance to cover their college education expenses, considerable research has dealt with the effects of financial assistance on student retention. There are indicators that both the quantity and quality of the financial aid may be factors, although research results are contradictory and

inconclusive.

Financial aid in the form of loans and grants was found to have positive effects on persistence. Campus based aid programs were found to have a significant effect on new freshmen persistence (Voorhees, 1985). Jensen (1983) concluded that grant and scholarship money usually enhances persistence.

Murdock (1987) found that financial aid appeared to have a greater impact on the latter years of college than on the freshman year. As students progress through college, more time and money are invested, thus increasing the commitment to degree completion. As a result of the accumulated monetary investment and the increased cost of college expenses, financial aid may be more critical to upperclassmen in affecting their decisions to remain in college.

In a study by The American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (Beal, 1980), it was found that some financial concerns do have an affect on retention. Student concerns about finances, loans, and full-time employment were found to be negative influences. Scholarships, grants, and part-time employment had a positive impact. Beal concluded that students who

see college experiences as rewarding and directly tied to their future are more likely to withstand financial burdens and accept short-term debt to finish their degree. If the college experience is seen as unrewarding and irrelevant, the slightest financial problems can result in withdrawal.

Stodt (1987) determined that financial assistance which permitted students to attend school full-time rather than part-time enabled the students to devote more time to their college learning and social activities. She also found that employment on campus promoted additional involvement with the institution.

Historically, there is a lack of consistent research relative to the effects of financial aid on student retention. Possible explanations for this could be that there have been substantial changes in the amounts and types of aid currently available, or that financial concerns are of such a personal and individual nature that it is difficult to evaluate their impact in a general way. Thus, one should use caution in generalizing earlier findings to the current population or to the entire college population. Ramist (1981) concluded that research results were confusing in regard to the effect of financial aid on college

student persistence.

Changes in student loan programs, unexpected changes in family or individual finances, and termination of employment could all be situations that would reduce the amount of disposable income to which a student had access. This could result in at least a temporary withdrawal from classes. Students with modest financial resources may alter their attendance patterns, perhaps becoming part-time students.

Financial considerations are only one part of a complex, multifaceted decision making process. That process also depends greatly on the social and intellectual experiences after entering college. It seems probable, however, that certain types of financial aid, especially student on-campus employment, may help to strengthen many students' feelings of incorporation into the college community.

#### CONCLUSION

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent that there are many interrelated variables affecting the retention of college students. In addition to the four variables examined in this paper, others deserving mention include: maturity, institutional "fit", degree

of commitment, and educational objectives. It is impossible to isolate a single cause for attrition, because there is no simple solution for a complex problem. There is continued need for research in the area of student retention.

Specifically, Tinto (1988) advocated studies which critically examine whether the process of departure varies over the span of college years. Tinto further suggested the need for close examination of the different types of students and institutional settings.

Although research to date has focused primarily on typical college students, the recent high school graduates, adult learners and transfer students have some unique concerns which could directly impact their decision to leave an institution. The college experiences of a part-time student may vary greatly from those of a full-time student. Additionally, a single mother working full-time and attending college full-time would undoubtedly experience college much differently than a residential student who works only half-time while attending college on a full-time basis.

Studies have repeatedly shown that the highest incidence of departure occurs during the first year

of college. Because of the critical nature of the early stages in a college career, Tinto (1988) supported "front-loading" of institutional retention action. It is further noted that retention efforts must not stop there but be incorporated throughout a student's entire college career. Research by Billson and Terry (1987) indicated that, because the institution has made greater investments in junior and senior students, it is important to continue retention strategies throughout a student's college career.

Further supported in this literature review is the fact that striving to increase retention rates of college students is not an individual task. Examples of the student services division working cooperatively with the academic affairs division to incorporate students into the college community have been cited. It is imperative for this cooperative environment to exist in order to maximize student retention.

The literature presents an optimistic attitude about retention. There are possibilities for improved retention rates, and the cost, time, and effort to implement them may be the most economical option for

colleges to pursue. Positive results have been achieved even when simple retention programs have been implemented.

Actually, the goals of the institution and the goals of the student are mutually reinforcing. If student life on campus is evaluated in terms of developing student friendships, participation in college life and personal development, all are found to contribute to students' satisfaction with and involvement in the college community, and ultimately to their retention. Therefore, if the institution allocates resources toward attaining these goals, the institution will simultaneously be achieving its goals of a quality education, student development, and student retention.



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