Factors Promoting Persistence for Academically At-Risk College Students

Dr. Dana Steward
Assistant Provost for General Education and Transition
Southwest Baptist University
Background

• Six-year graduation rates over past 20 years

• Students entering college academically underprepared

• The data from my institution:
  • Students entering as academically at-risk
    • Six-year graduation: 21.1% (versus 62.0% for those not at-risk)
    • To the fourth year: 24.9% (versus 60.9% for those not at-risk)

• Need to understand:
  • The complex experiences of academically at-risk students (Moore, 2015)
  • Student persistence beyond the first-year (Nora & Crisp, 2012)
  • Why students stay, not just why they leave (Braxton et al., 2014; Padilla, 1999; Tinto, 2012b)
    • Within the institutional setting (Heaney & Fisher, 2011; Kuh et al., 2006; Reason, 2009)
Conceptual Framework
Adapted from Reason (2009)
Design of the Study

• Methodology
  • Basic qualitative

• Setting
  • Private, Faith-based, Midwestern University
  • Approximately 1,400 undergraduate students on the main campus

• Participants
  • Current (Spring 2018), full-time students continuously enrolled at institution through at least the fourth year (seventh semester)
  • At-risk based on high school performance indicators

• Data collection
  • Three tools
    • Individual interviews – 8 participants; semi-structured format
    • Electronic open-ended survey – 10 participants
    • Electronic reflective writing – 5 participants (also completed survey)
      • Explored the factors promoting and the factors impeding persistence at yearly transitions (e.g.-first to second year, etc.)
      • Requested participants write 50- to 150-word responses
Research Questions

• For students who entered my university as academically at-risk:
  • which factors contributed to their persistence to the fourth year?
  • which factors impeded their persistence to the fourth year?
## Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Caring and supportive campus</th>
<th>Campus connections</th>
<th>Non-college people</th>
<th>A refusal to quit</th>
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<td><strong>Subthemes</strong></td>
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<td>Caring people, especially professors</td>
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<td>Relationships with peers</td>
<td>Encouragement and support of family</td>
<td>Adjusted mindsets</td>
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<td>Campus involvement</td>
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Findings:
Factors Promoting Persistence

• Caring and supportive campus
  • Caring people, especially professors
  • Success-oriented institution
    • Effective teaching strategies, opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, and sequencing of their courses.
• Positive campus environment
  • Faith-based commitment, policies, approach to teaching and learning.

“I love the small college feel. It is nice to have the open door policy...If I needed anything, my professors and advisor were always there. It felt like one big family. I really don’t know if I could have had a better experience anywhere else!”
Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

- Campus Connections
  - Relationships with peers
  - Campus involvement
  - Connection to academic program
  - Being known as a person

“I can’t wait to come back and see them and hang out with them again.”

“I became lifelong friends...I’ve lived with them...They were in my wedding. I mean, that’s one the main reasons I’ve stayed.”
Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

• Non-campus people
  • Family encouragement and support
    “Biggest factor, number one is my mom’s continuous support and encouragement. She always says, ‘Yeah, it’s going to be hard, but you’ll get it done.’ There’s never been a question of it. It’s ‘You will get this done, no matter how long it takes, no matter how hard it is.’”

• Family pressure or expectation
  • Discussed family expectations, such as a value of,
    “once your start something, you finish it”,
  or the pressure to complete a degree, as seen by the following participant comment:
    “It’s not really been an option not to do it.”
Findings:
Factors Promoting Persistence

- Non-campus people - Additional subthemes
  - To make family proud
    “I want to make my grandparents proud.”
  - Encouragement and support of non-college friends and co-workers
    “It’s just the fact that, alright, other people will actually want to see me graduate as well. It’s not just my parents...”
  - Seeing struggle of non-college friends
    “What they’re doing now doesn’t even compare to being here.... it makes me just come back.”
Findings: Factors Promoting Persistence

• A refusal to quit - changes in their mindset or actions, in order to persist.
  • Adjusted mindsets
    “I finally figured out what it would be like after college...that pushed me to keep coming back...so I can learn more and get a degree and be more eligible for different jobs.”

• Adjusted actions
  • Increased effort towards academics or used academic support resources in order to continue to enroll.
    “I learned to just ask for help. I was so embarrassed to ask for help. And, I felt dumb going to math tutoring. I literally just felt so dumb, but it helped so much.”
Findings:
Factors Promoting Persistence

• A refusal to quit – Additional subtheme
  • Pivotal moments - a single moment that was critical to their persistence:
    • One participant discussed an encounter where a member of the campus community doubted his ability to be successful. The participant told the individual:
      “In four years, when I can graduate, I’ll come back to you, and I’ll tell you I did it. Kind of just say too bad – you were all wrong.”

    • Another participant discussed receiving a letter saying she would need to appeal to continue to receive financial aid. She said:
      “It was like that light bulb moment...This is my future. This is how I want things, you know, I want all these kids, and I can’t do that working a minimum wage job. So, after I got the letter, it was like the life you want versus the life you’ll have...I’ve just got to. That was the biggest moment...That was the turn-around.”
## Findings:
### Factors Impeding Persistence

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<th>Non-academic institutional impediments</th>
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Findings: Factors Impeding Persistence

• Academic barriers
  • Struggles with coursework
  • In-class obstacles
  • Academic programming issues
  • Out-of-sequence course
  • Lack of preparation for college

“My grades suffered my first year and a halfish here... Just because I thought, I guess, it would be easier...In high school, I mean, I had decent grades. I had all As, but, I mean, I didn’t have to try super hard for them.”

“It was tough. I came in thinking I could just do it without studying. I was able to do that in high school.”
Findings:
Factors Impeding Persistence

• Non-academic institutional impediments
  • Cost of tuition
    “Money’s been a massive obstacle.”
  • Negative peer experiences
    “Their work ethic doesn’t match mine.”
    “…aren’t willing to listen to others’ sides”
  • Trivial rules – specifically within the residence halls
    “The really annoying rules and fines for everything.”
  • Barriers with campus offerings
    • Included a lack of activities and the cafeteria food
  • Actions misalignment with mission
Findings: Factors Impeding Persistence

• Personal obstacles
  • Individual student attributes
    • Impediments cause by internal issues, such as lack of sense of belonging, homesickness, lack of motivation, negative perspectives, or lack of direction.

  “Being an average student and feeling inadequate to be here”

  “Sometimes, I just don’t want to do school.”

• Non-college issues
  • Family issues, relationships with peers outside the institution, or the enticement of other opportunities

  “Being away from my family, watching my family pass away and go to jail has made college quite difficult. I feel like I can prevent a lot of things back home, but I am here.”
Discussion

• Overall, the findings revealed that:
  • the components of the framework are factors in at-risk student persistence.
  • at-risk student persistence is typically dependent upon a combination of influences, which is consistent with a number of frameworks, theories, or models regarding college student retention (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993).
  • the multi-factor nature of the findings confirms the complexity of at-risk college student persistence (Braxton et al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).
Discussion

• Specifically, the findings revealed:
  • The importance of a caring and supportive campus environment
    • Non-academic barriers within the institution may be viewed as issues
      that do not reflect a caring environment (Kuh et al., 2006).
  • Within Pre-College Characteristics
    • Changes in mindset and actions extend beyond the inclusion
      of pre-college characteristics in the framework
  • Pivotal Moments subtheme
    • Similar to the concept of a disorienting dilemma, which is the initial
      step in transformational learning (Mezirow, 1978).
  • The most common barrier to persistence being academic struggle
    was not surprising and is consistent with research (ACT, 2012; Habley et al.,
    2012; Kinzie et al., 2008).
Recommendations for Practice

• With the goal of fostering persistence, in what ways should practice be informed by these findings?
Recommendations for Practice

- Continue to cultivate a culture of care and support for academically at-risk students.
  - Share student testimonies with faculty regarding the value of:
    - Making a personal connection with students
    - Being available to students outside of class
    - The use of teaching pedagogies that involve students in the learning process
  - Consider partnering with families of at-risk students
    - Communicate with families on a regularly basis, especially during the first two years, which are when participants indicated they faced the most barriers
    - Ensure families have up-to-date contact and support structure information
Recommendations for Practice

• Due to the academic struggle many of the participants shared, it is recommended the institution:
  • Continue to provide and strengthen the academic support resources available to students, especially in the first two years.
    • Consider additional early warning indicators
  • Provide opportunity for students who enter as academically at-risk to consider and revise their mindset and actions regarding the value of college and their approach to academics
    • Provide professional development for faculty and select staff (those who have high contact with students) regarding the best ways to help students reflect on their mindset and actions and then make needed adjustments.
Final Thoughts / Questions

Contact Info:
Dr. Dana Steward, Southwest Baptist University
417-328-1425 dsteward@sbuniv.edu
References


