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Purpose of Attending College: A Factor for Success?

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Abstract

As higher education accountability increases and financial resources decrease, concerns over student retention rates and the reasons why students remain at a post-secondary institution have moved to the forefront. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on freshman students' performance at a university in the southeastern region of the United States. The researchers conducted an exploratory observational study using pre-existing data from the *Freshman Orientation Survey* (Brown, 2012), which included a sample of 209 participants. A series of descriptive and frequency analyses were conducted. Then, a series of correlational analyses were conducted among the intrinsic and extrinsic variables and participant's first-semester and first-year grade point averages. The results suggest there are weak relationships between the reason for attendance, both intrinsically and extrinsically, and a student's grade point average.

Despite decades of educational research in student persistence, the current rate of student retention for freshman college students is 73.3% for four-year public institutions. Only 29% of undergraduate students graduate within 4 years, and 43% will graduate within 6 years. Unfortunately, these rates have remained relatively unchanged since 1983 (ACT, 2011). The student departure rate has remained relatively stagnant at 45% for over 100 years (Braxton, 2004). Higher education has seen a heightened awareness for increasing persistence, progression, and graduation rates. In addition, for-profit businesses and consulting firms have formed to assist institutions with increasing student

persistence rates. Despite all of these efforts, higher education has not seen a substantial change in student persistence rates (Tinto, 2006). According to Tinto (2006), the knowledge and theory gained from the decades of research has not translated into effective practice in higher education. In other words, there is a distinct difference between understanding why students depart and why students persist. A large body of empirical work outlines the significant student characteristics that will explain why students depart from a given institution, but the empirical work does not examine how implementing institutional practices will help students persist and succeed. Meanwhile there continue to be

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consequences for attrition on both students and institutions.

The consequences of departing an institution can plague the departing students for a lifetime. Once students leave the post-secondary institution, they will earn less money compared to their counterparts who complete a baccalaureate degree, and they will be burdened with the repayment of college loans (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Laird, Chen, & Kuh, 2008). In the current economy, some scholars estimate that nearly 80% of high school graduates require some type of post-secondary education. In addition, college graduates will earn \$1 million dollars more than high school graduates. Both of these statistics indicate that higher education can serve as a good financial investment (Laird et al., 2008).

Beyond the lingering impact on the student, the low student persistence rates affect the individual institutions. The dismal percentages can have negative impact on an institution's enrollments and budgets. These rates also affect the public's perception of the institution's quality (Braxton, 2008). In addition, the proposed revision to the Higher Education Act may consider student performance, student retention, and graduate rates to determine institutional effectiveness (Fike & Fike, 2008; Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, & Le, 2006). Studies have shown that a college student's first-year experience in an undergraduate program largely determines their persistence at a university. The student's experiences during the first few weeks have been associated with academic performance, persistence, and graduation (Woosley, 2003; Woosley & Miller, 2009). Success during this first year is crucial as a student's success weighs heavily on the ability to integrate into the academic and social communities within the college setting. It has been suggested that college grades could

be the single best predicting factor of student persistence, degree completion, and further education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 396). While this first year tends to be critical for future success, persistence and retention is a multifaceted problem. Academic success is influenced by many characteristics, including pre-college variables (e.g., why they are attending college). The pre-enrollment expectations of undergraduate students have a major impact on whether those students will stay at or leave an institution (Tinto, 2006). Tinto believed the students who persisted at an institution had different reasons for attending compared to students who did not persist. Students who entered college seeking greater vocational training had a tendency to leave unsuccessfully in comparison to students who entered to gain further knowledge or to prepare for a career (as cited in McCubbin, 2003). Furthermore, Tinto found that institutional commitment factors, such as reasons for attending a specific institution, can influence whether students remain at the institution until graduation. According to Spady (1971), institutional commitment was found to be a statistically significant predicting variable for explaining the variance in first-year, undergraduate student retention. Woosley and Miller (2009) found in their research, which was conducted at Ball State University, that early academic and social integrations as well as institutional commitment are good predictors of retention and academic performance among freshman college students.

Review of the Literature

A student may choose to attend a certain college or university for a specific degree program offered at the institution. Some researchers have found commonality of motivations among certain degrees. Corts and Stonner (2011) surveyed 119

participants using the College motives scale, the Learning or Grade Orientation measure and some general demographic questions. The data showed the humanities and social science students scored higher on the self-discovery factor for motivation and had a greater desire to learn rather than concern over grades, while business students focused more on grades and attended college mostly to get a higher paying job. Corts' and Stonner's research participants came from four different types of institutions; therefore, they were able to compare and contrast among the institutions. They found that self-discovery was ranked higher as a motivation among liberal arts students compared to students at community colleges and research universities. Additionally, they found variations among genders; while both males and females often attend college for greater career opportunities, their other motivations differ. Women are striving for intellectual success and equality in the work force while men desire financial stability and self-improvement. As a result of their research, the importance of attending an institution for a specific degree program is highlighted. The reasons behind the specific degree program may affect the academic performance and outcomes of the students within a certain major.

Another common reason for students to choose a college is for the social interaction it will provide. This motivation can have advantages. Specifically, by establishing relationships among peers and faculty, students tend to be satisfied with the institution. Thus, they tend to have higher, first-year persistence, grade performance, and graduation rates (Spady 1971; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). A disadvantage of social motivations was found in a recent study by Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall and Abel (2013) with 2,520 students from one large community college and one small liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States.

The students were given a web based survey in which the results revealed a strong negative relationship existed between going to college for relatedness purposes among peers and a student's grade point average (GPA) (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). The negative impact of attending for relatedness with peers was greater for the male participants than for the female participants, but attending college for relatedness to peers did not relate to intentions to persist among the participants. In contrast, attending college for relatedness to faculty had a positive relationship with a student's GPA. Lundburg and Schreiner (2004) sought to examine the frequency and quality of faculty-student relationships on learning among various races and ethnic groups of students. Lundburg and Schreiner's results indicated that quality of faculty-student relationships was the single variable to significantly predict learning for all races/ethnic groups they studied (i.e., African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Mexican American, Hispanic/Puerto Rican, Native American, White and Multi-ethnic). Attending college for peer relationships may not be the best choice for academic success; however, choosing to attend an institution with faculty who invest in their students will likely have a positive outcome on a student's GPA (Guiffrida et al., 2013; Lundburg & Schreiner, 2004; Spady, 1971; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1978). Additional variables also play a role in a student's motivation, success, and persistence. A study was conducted by Goodman and fellow colleagues (2011) to examine a student's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the student's academic success, with effort as a mediating variable. The study was conducted using a convenience sample of 254 commerce students in the Western Cape of South Africa who were given an online questionnaire. From the data, researchers

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concluded that students who are motivated intrinsically have a tendency to apply effort and succeed academically as a result. The findings suggest that effort is only a partial motivator and other variables need to be considered. Additionally, in the sample from this study, effort was a greater predictor of academic success over extrinsic motivation. The year of study (e.g., freshman or senior) was referenced by the researchers as a potential motivating factor (Goodman et al., 2011). Kitsantas, Winsler, and Huie (2008) conducted a study using a questionnaire given to 243 first-semester freshman at a large mid-Atlantic university. The researchers were seeking to examine the effect of self-regulation and motivation on academics. Time management and self-efficacy were each significant factors in predicting second semester academic outcomes. Time management continued serving as a predictor for student GPAs at the end of their second year.

Furthermore, a student's academic success can be affected by other means outside of motivation, such as factors concerning a student's sense of control. DeAngelis (2003) found that a student's sense of control, through such skills as problem solving and decision making, had positive implications on a student's academic performance. Stupnisky and colleagues also determined that a student's GPA was affected positively by the student's level of perceived control (Stupnisky et al., 2003). Such control may stand alone or contribute to a student's motivation to succeed, providing the student with the momentum they need to succeed. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic factors on freshman students' performance as measured by their GPA. Some of the reasons given for attending college are more intrinsic while others are extrinsic. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), a

person must have interest and enjoyment in a task and feelings of competency and self-determination to be considered intrinsically motivated (as cited in Goodman, 2011); it is an internal motivation. On the other hand, a person has extrinsic motivation when they behave based on rewards or the external influence of others (Sturman, 1999, as cited in Goodman, 2011). Some intrinsic motivations to attend college include a student's desire to learn more about what interests him or her, to become a more cultured individual, and to prepare for a professional career, while some extrinsic motivators might include: peer or parent influence, to make more money, to get a better job, and convenience of the institution location.

Methods

Participants

The sample included incoming freshmen who declared a major within the College. A total of 209 participants completed the survey in full. Of the participants, 83.7% were female and 16.3% were male. The number of white participants ($n = 86$; 41.4%) was similar to the number of black participants ($n = 96$; 45.9%). The remaining 12 participants, 5.7%, indicated "other" as their racial classification. First-generation college students (i.e., students whose parents did not earn a college degree) made up 30.1% of the participants ($n = 63$), and 28.7% of the participants were second generation college students ($n = 60$). Of the remaining participants, 35.9% were classified as continuing generation college students ($n = 75$) and 5.3% were classified as "unknown" ($n = 11$). The following table (Table 1) shows the frequency and percent of participants by the initially declared major within the College.

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Participants Categorized by Initially Declared Major

Major	<i>n</i>	%
Early Childhood Education	31	14.8
Middle Grades Education	4	1.9
Secondary Education	8	3.8
Special Education	3	1.4
Health & Physical Education	3	1.4
Nursing	107	51.2
Exercise Science	37	17.7
Health Science	16	7.7
Total	209	100%

Data Collection

The researchers conducted an exploratory observational study using pre-existing data from the *Freshman Orientation Survey* (Brown, 2012). The survey was given at the summer orientation sessions to incoming freshman who declared a major within the College. In total, there were five sessions offered throughout the summer. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to consent to their participation and the use of their responses for research purposes. It took the participants between 10 and 15 minutes to complete the survey. The items concerning intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to attend college were rated on a four-point Likert scale, with 1 representing *Not Important* and 4 representing *Extremely Important*. The survey data was merged with institutional research data (i.e., first-semester and first-year GPAs).

Results

Using SPSS, a series of descriptive and frequency analyses were conducted. Then, a series of correlational analyses were

conducted among the intrinsic and extrinsic variables and participant's first-semester and first-year grade point averages. Every item, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, for the survey question pertaining to what participants wanted based on their decision to attend college (e.g., to prepare for a professional career) had a high mean for all 209 participants, which indicated relatively high importance. With a range of 1 to 4, the highest mean (3.87) was found for the item "to prepare for a professional career" with a standard deviation of 0.394. The lowest mean (3.16) was found for the item "to please my parents and family" with a standard deviation of 0.965. No relationships were found only for a person attending college to get a better job and their first-semester GPA ($r = .017$) and first-year GPA ($r = .009$); however, a weak, positive relationship was found between the participants who were attending college to learn more about what interests them and their first-semester GPA ($r = .113$). By the end of their freshman year, the relationship was negative for learning more about what interests the student and their GPA ($r = -.042$). A weak, negative relationship was found between a student attending college to make more money and the student's freshman year GPA ($r = -.140$), meaning students who attended college to earn more money tended to perform poorly. The negative relationship between a student attending to make more money and their first-semester GPA was weaker ($r = -.073$), yet remains the strongest correlation found for first-semester GPA in this study.

Of the 209 survey participants, 113 remained at the institution by the end of the first year. The respondents were asked to answer the question, "What is your primary reason for attending Columbus State University (CSU)?" In response to the question, 57 participants gave location as their answer, and 49 of those respondents

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remained at the institution at end of the first year. Of the participants who gave location as their primary reason for attending, 21.2% earned lower than a 3.0 first-year GPA while 30.9% earned a 3.0 GPA or higher. This finding suggests that location of an institution can increase the success of a student's academics; however, location as the primary reason was the category that had the most students ($n = 8$) leave by the end of the first year suggesting that location does not help with retention rates. A larger percentage of participants (18.6%) who marked academic reputation of CSU as their primary reason for attending made less than a 3.0 first-year GPA while only 9.9% who gave the same reason made a 3.0 or higher GPA. Ironically, of the participants who attended the institution for its academic reputation, a lower percentage earned higher academic performance scores. Four participants who attended for the academic reputation did not remain at the institution by the end of the first year. Attending for a specific degree program or faculty member had the lowest attrition with only one respondent leaving by the end of the first year, meaning individual faculty members or specific programs of study may be the key for unlocking the current retention puzzle. The percentage of participants making lower than a 3.0 first-year GPA (37.2%) was similar to the percentage of participants who made a 3.0 or higher GPA (37.0%). Lastly, 15.0% of participants who gave "other" as their primary reason made lower than a 3.0 first-year GPA, and 18.5% of the participants made a 3.0 or higher GPA. Two participants from the "other" category did not remain at the institution by the end of the first year.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Participants' Reason for Attending

Reason For Attending	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
To prepare for a professional career	3.87	0.39
To get a better job	3.86	0.37
To learn more things that interest me	3.62	0.67
To become a more cultured and well-round individual	3.62	0.63
To make more money	3.61	0.67
To please my parents and family	3.16	0.97
To get more vocational training	3.36	0.76
To gain knowledge	3.86	0.36

Discussion

The results of this study suggest there are broad reasons, both intrinsically and extrinsically for students attending college. The relationships between these reasons and freshman GPAs were weak, and most of them were negative among this sample; some predictions can be made. This research suggests that the effects of extrinsic motivation (i.e., to get a better job) had the greatest impact on academic performance among these participants. Also, the researchers hypothesized that many of the students who attend a university to be near their family will not have to experience homesickness and may have support when needed; therefore, they were more likely to succeed academically. Attending an

institution for the academic reputation did not guarantee that a student will succeed academically themselves. Students who attended an institution for a specific degree program or faculty member were more likely to remain at the institution, but their academics could go in either direction. From this study, the researchers concluded that perhaps it was strictly the motivation of a student to succeed, rather than the reason behind their attending college, which propels them to success. According to Pintrich and Schunk (2002), since the beginning of achievement motivation and behavior research, it has been a major finding that when people expect to succeed they try hard, remain persistent, and perform well (as cited in Pintrich, 2003)

Further research is needed to determine the generalization of this research. First, a larger more diverse sample could assist in generalizing the data. The *Freshman Orientation Survey* (Brown, 2012) will be administered during subsequent orientation sessions in order to continue the data collection process and expand the pool of participants. Second, future research could prove helpful by examining additional reasons individuals attend college and giving survey respondents the opportunity to specify the reason they choose “other” in their reason for attending. Future research could also provide a comparison of the academic success and retention of commuter versus residential students. This comparison could provide greater insight into the academic outcome of students attending college for the location of the institution. The researchers contend with existing research that the freshman year is vital to students’ success and persistence since most college students decide whether or not to drop-out during the summer between the first and second years (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985), which means interventions need to occur

during the freshman college year to be most effective.

This study could assist with increasing student retention and persistence. If students are attending and succeeding most effectively because of their motivation to get a better job, institutions could focus on setting up, or promoting already established systems, to attract more students to attend for the same reason. For example, having an institutional department to assist students with the transition from high school graduation to college and again later with the transition from college graduation to a job, with assistance in resume writing and interview preparation, could prove to be a helpful attraction. Additionally, an institution can utilize undergraduate work study and undergraduate research assistantships, which provide students with work related experiences within their specific programs or with a specific faculty member, to strengthen faculty and student interactions and promote an overall sense of institutional commitment.

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