

Factors Affecting the Graduation Rates of University Students from Underrepresented Populations

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One of the most pressing issues facing American universities is the number of students who fail to graduate. Nearly one out of five four-year institutions graduate fewer than one-third of its first-time, full-time degree-seeking first-year students within six years (Carey, 2004). Although there are various explanations for attrition, students often leave for personal reasons, job demands, dissatisfaction with the academic environment, and incongruence with campus values (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). Low graduation rates: (a) cost universities scarce resources; (b) weaken the ability to meet educational objectives; and (c) reflect the university's inability to meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of students (Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, & Lynch, 2002).

This article focuses on one of the most significant issues of our time regarding students from historically underrepresented populations. As the country's racial/ethnic minority representation increases, colleges and universities must seek ways to diversify their enrollment to better prepare all students to live and work in a diverse democracy. In order to understand the complexities faced by students with backgrounds other than the majority culture, which may be factors that predict these students' graduation rates, the article is divided into the subheadings: (a) Retaining African American students, (b) Issues impacting Hispanic college student retention, (c) College persistence and Asian Pacific American students, and (d) Retention of Native American students.

Retaining African American Students

A number of sources reviewed regarding African American student retention focus on four factors: (a) pre-entry attributes, (b) goals and commitments, (c) institutional experiences, and (d) personal and normative integration.

Pre-Entry Attributes

Schwartz and Washington (2002) in a study of 229 African American freshmen examined the extent to which pre-college factors and college experiences impacted students' academic performance and retention. The study found that students' high school rank and students' perceptions of their social adjustment on campus were strong predictors of retention. The students whose high school ranks were higher and students who felt they were part of the social fabric of the institution were more likely to return the next semester. In a longitudinal study, Hagedorn, Maxwell, and Hampton (2002) found that African American male students' high school grades predicted retention. Good, Halpin, and Halpin (2002) found that a pre-college program for engineering students resulted in significantly higher retention rates when compared to students who did not participate in the pre-college program. Pike and Killian (2001) following an examination of a study involving 89 African American students, believed that African American students' expectations were unrealistic regarding college academic achievement and that this could negatively impact African American retention.

Goals and Commitments

Students who are committed to their institutions are more likely to persist and graduate (Tinto, 1999). Students' perceptions of social support may also facilitate an increased commitment to the institution and serve to help African American students feel that their goals and interests are congruent with the university's academic mission (Flowers & Pascarella, 2003). Gruenwald (2003) states that institutions committed to African American student retention should: (a) examine the institution's philosophy and mission, (b) assess the institution's ability to work with African American students, (c) assess African American students' academic and social readiness, (d) schedule early visits to

institutions, (e) establish rapport with African American students, (f) help African American students learn to work within the organizational structure, (g) develop an on-going mentoring program, (h) assist African American students in career exploration, and (i) help African American students prepare for the work world.

Institutional Experiences

In a study of the perceptions of 60 African American students who attended a predominantly White institution regarding the factors needed to enhance retention at his university, Gladwell (2000) found these factors important: (a) the development of special support programs for African American students, (b) diversity training for all faculty and staff, (c) hiring additional African American faculty and staff, (d) increased faculty-student interaction, (e) the initiation of a counseling program specifically for African American students, and (f) opportunities to assist in planning campus programs. Rowley (2000) found that African American students reported that discrimination, isolation, and a lack of support services did not contribute in positive ways to African American students and served as a distraction to learning.

Personal and Normative Integration

The extent to which a student is involved on campus, acclimated to the academic culture of the institution, and connected socially to various components of the university community (i.e., faculty, administrators, student affairs professionals, and peer groups) has shown to be a reasonably strong predictor of student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1999). Flowers (2004) also found that student development counselors play a central role in supporting and increasing African American student retention.

Issues Impacting Hispanic College Student Retention

The continued growth of the Hispanic college-going population challenges college and university personnel to become better informed regarding the issues that affect the persistence of these students. There are significant differences in educational attainment within the Hispanic community. Four factors contribute to these differences: (a) personal factors, (b) environmental factors, (c) involvement factors, and (d) socio-cultural factors.

Personal Factors

Personal factors are what are referred to in the literature as background characteristics or pre-college variables. These personal factors are useful in understanding how students adjust to college (Hurtado, 2000). Personal factors include high grade point average and test scores, academic self-concept, family support, and finances.

High grade point average. Admission to the nation's colleges and universities continues to rely on traditional measurements such as high school grade point average and scores on college entrance exams. College success is often predicted based on how well a student has performed in high school. Lesure-Lester (2003) wrote there is evidence that indicates test scores may not predict early college grades for Hispanic students as well as it does for White students. In addition, test scores (i.e., SAT scores) did not predict college GPAs, time to completion of degree, or likelihood of applying to graduate school.

Academic self-concept. Nora (2001) reported that academic self-concept was significantly related to GPA and that Mexican American students with the same academic background were more likely to achieve higher grades if they had greater confidence in their academic abilities. Hernandez (2000) reported that successful Hispanic students, who demonstrated a positive mental outlook, attributed this as the single most important factor that influenced their retention in college.

The family. Wintre and Jaffe (2002) reported the importance of the family in the retention of Hispanic college students. The family was described as a source of support and encouragement; however, the family also placed pressure on their students by letting them know that dropping out was not an option.

Finances. Financial assistance is essential to the enrollment and retention of students from low-income backgrounds

in higher education (Nora, 2001). Evidence accumulated over the past decade indicates that financial aid does impact student persistence, especially among the economically disadvantaged (Tinto, 1994). The issue of financing a college education and its impact on Hispanic students' retention is critical when one considers the national trend of increased student tuition while decreasing financial aid programs. This may result in many Hispanic students being required to work additional hours to defray educational expenses, attending college part-time in order to mitigate college costs, or deferring enrollment in college during the traditional college-age years (Rooney, 2002).

Environmental Factors

Environmental theory provides the basis from which to understand the relationship between students and the campus environment (Alonzo-Zaldivar, 2003). Lane (2002) wrote that student affairs professionals can no longer ignore or underestimate the respective influence of the many on-and-off campus variables (racial climate, presence of an ethnic community, and working on or off campus) that simultaneously affect student behaviors.

Racial climate. An enduring concern is the need for institutions to have an increased comprehension of the causes of racially tense campus environments before taking into account how these specific incidents affect students' development and influence their retention (Harvey, 2001). In relation to Hispanic college students, the campus climate can facilitate Hispanic students' transition to collegiate life and combat common problems such as feelings of isolation. The author further states that there is a substantial amount of support that campus climate directly relates to the success or failure of students in postsecondary education.

Presence of an ethnic community. Hernandez's (2000) research on Hispanic student retention reported that finding a Hispanic community on a predominantly White campus had a positive impact on retention. By meeting other Hispanics, students are better able to cope with the college environment. Students need to feel that they matter and have a sense of belonging to succeed in college. If students feel ignored and unaccepted by other students, faculty, or staff, they feel marginalized and are much less likely to persist in college.

Working and living off campus. Students who work part-time off campus constrain their ability to spend time on campus interacting with other members of the institution, both faculty and student peers (Sedlacek, Longerbeam, & Alatorre, 2003).

Involvement Factors

Involvement theory affirms the belief that students learn best and are more likely to persist by becoming involved in the campus community (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002). Involvement factors are those variables that occur within the college environment and focus on specific ways Hispanic students get involved. Some involvement factors are: (a) student-faculty interaction, (b) the role of the mentorship, and (c) participation in student organizations.

Faculty-student interaction. Students who have contact with faculty outside of the classroom are more likely to persist to graduation, exhibit higher levels of achievement, and be more satisfied with college than students not involved with faculty outside of the classroom (ACT, 2002). Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, and Alisat (2000) reported that relationships with minority faculty proved to be the most significant dimension of social integration in affecting grade point average. Similarly, Hernandez and Lopez (2004) reported that Hispanic students who perceive a student-centered faculty and have opportunities for faculty interaction were more likely to adjust to college.

Mentorship. Mentoring addresses several causes of student attrition and delayed graduation, including the lack of proper academic preparation for college and the lack of knowledge about or access to social or academic resources (Hernandez, 2000). Hernandez and Lopez (2004) reported that a common theme in a qualitative study of Hispanic students at a selective university was the importance of influential individuals outside of their immediate family members. Mentoring programs can be an effective tool in helping minorities succeed in unfamiliar settings.

Participation in student organizations. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) maintain that co-curricular involvement, including membership in student organizations has a positive college and post-college effect on educational persistence and attainment. Participation in student organizations seems to lead to greater involvement in the overall

college experience.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Socio-cultural factors are “multiple forces that can shape the personal and environmental experiences of Hispanic college students and include various aspects of identity development” (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004, p. 49). These socio-cultural factors include: (a) immigrant status, (b) ethnic identity, (c) gender roles, (d) community orientation, and (e) the role of religion.

Immigrant status. In a study which examined the extent of immigrants' participation in United States higher education, Rooney (2002) reported that American-born children of Hispanic immigrants fared better than their foreign-born Hispanic peers. Among American-born high school graduates in the 18-24 age range, 42% were attending college, a rate similar to that of non-Hispanic White Americans. Only 25% of foreign-born Hispanics in this age group were enrolled in an undergraduate institution.

Ethnic identity development. Ethnic identity refers to “one's knowledge of personal ownership or membership in the ethnic group, and the correlated knowledge, understanding, values, behaviors, and proud feelings that are direct implications of that ownership” (Rooney, 2002, p. 159). This author suggested that a developmental challenge faced by Hispanic college students is the conflict between the need to establish their personal identity within their ethnic heritage as well as within the American culture and cited several conditions influencing Hispanic students' identity: (a) their generational status within the United States, (b) the environment where they grew up, and (c) their self-perception.

Gender roles. Nora (2001) conducted a cross-cultural study that examined gender role identities of male and female college students from four ethnic/racial groups. The researcher reported that “in spite of mixed results, what appears to be fairly consistent in the literature is that there are differences in sex role orientation that can be attributed to race/ethnicity, gender, and social class for the cultural groups in this study” (p. 247).

Community orientation. For many Hispanics, the term community connotes pride in the barrio and its ethnic heritage and solidarity in tackling community issues and problems (Torres, 2003). First generation college students may be more inclined to sustain communal ties and responsibilities. In addition, membership in external communities may play a vital role in persistence. Membership in external communities can result in positive or negative outcomes. When the values of the external communities support the goals of a college education, they may aid persistence. When they oppose them, the reverse may apply because of the ways in which “external obligations limit one's ability to meet the demands of college” (Tinto, 1994, p. 63).

The role of religion. The role of religion to the Hispanic community is significant when examining Hispanic students' participation in academe (Kuh, 2003). Hispanics believe in some sort of spirituality, and spiritual matters often weave themselves into the lives and decisions made by college students. A study by Whitham (2003) reported that Hispanic immigrants who attend church are more likely to do well in school and reverse high dropout rates.

College Persistence and Asian Pacific American Students

A review of the theoretical and empirical literature on the retention of Asian Pacific American (APA) students revealed minimal results (Yeh, 2004). Most of the research conducted on Asian Pacific American students focuses on those of East Asian descent (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) because of their significant numbers and longer history in the United States (McEwen, Kodama, Alvarez, Lee, & Liang, 2002). While Filipino Americans comprise a large percentage of the APA population, they are often left out of the picture. Several studies were discovered; however, that identify the educational obstacles (i.e., individual and institutional factors) APA college students face.

Individual Factors

A majority of Southeast Asians (mainly Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong) who immigrated to the United States after 1975 came as refugees (Yeh, 2004). While most APAs are United States citizens by birth, they face

many of the same challenges that immigrants face: (a) academic under-preparedness, (b) first generation status, (c) language/ESL issues, (d) low-income background, (e) other family demands, and (f) cultural adjustment.

Academic under-preparedness. Southeast Asian immigrants are often academically under-prepared to some degree. Kim and Yeh (2002) affirm that coming to the United States as adolescents with little education, living in low-income neighborhoods, and attending low-performing schools place these students at a disadvantage in college.

First generation status. Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander students enrolled in college are almost always the first generation to do so, and as such, their families are unable to support them academically (Makuakane-Drechsel & Hagedorn, 2000). Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) state that first generation status is characteristic of many students who have difficulty transitioning and adjusting to college.

Language/ESL issues. Many Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders do not speak English as a primary language and they struggle with language issues when they arrive in the mainland United States. This results in the need for remediation courses when they reach college (Suzuki, 2002). Kerr (2001) found that many immigrant students experience academic difficulties because of their language barrier. This type of academic environment is alienating for these students and places them at risk of dropping out.

Low-income background. Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander college students who come from a low-income environment are usually expected to work from 15 to 50 hours per week to help support their families in addition to attending classes (Olenchak & Hebert, 2002). They face financial struggles to pay for college tuition, books, and fees, and because they cannot afford to live on campus, spend a great deal of time commuting from home. For these reasons, the students are deemed at risk of attrition from college (Yeh, 2004).

Other family demands. Asian Pacific American students from immigrant and low-income families often have parents who work two or three jobs to support the family. As a result, these students are often required to care for younger siblings, and take care of household duties. According to Kuh and Love (2000), these students spend most of their non-class time operating in their culture of origin, which reduces their likelihood of persistence.

Cultural adjustment. Newly arrived students from Southeast Asia or the Pacific Islands face significant cultural adjustments when they attend college in the mainland United States. Tierney (2000) argues that these students may leave college prematurely because the cultural distance between their cultures of origin is so far from the culture of immersion.

Institutional Factors

Two institutional factors that researchers contend significantly contribute to APA students' retention and persistence are marginalization and racial discrimination on campus.

Marginalization on campus. Kim and Yeh (2002) reported that since the number of Pacific Islanders, Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians is so small on most campuses, the few students who do attend feel alienated from the rest of the students on campus. In addition, as these same researchers document, some of the more wealthy Asian Americans will try to distance themselves from the less educated and poorer Asian American groups. Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) cite that these students who feel out of place may have difficulty adjusting to college.

Racial discrimination on campus. Suzuki (2002) highlights the increasing occurrence of racism, discrimination, and violence against APAs on college campuses. They report that this discrimination is exhibited not only by students, but faculty as well. Kim and Yeh (2002) also reported that APAs exhibited higher levels of distress from being threatened, racially insulted, and excluded from activities than did African American, Hispanic, and White students. Nora (2001) found that perceptions of discrimination and prejudice negatively affect minority student adjustment to college and damage their cognitive and affective development.

Retention of Native American Students

American Indian students comprise 1% of the total student population in the United States (Shield, 2004). Approximately 85% of Native American students attend public schools, with the Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools and tribal schools enrolling significant numbers. Yet Native American students have the highest dropout rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States, exceeding 65% nationally (Shield, 2004). This rate is almost twice that of White students. Of those Native American students who do graduate and enroll in college, between 75% and 93% will leave college before graduation (Pewewardy, 2001).

A major problem Native Americans face today is the complex and confusing pattern of laws, especially federal laws that dominate their lives. No other ethnic or cultural group is so heavily regulated (Lutz, 1988). Native Americans in general and Native American tribes specifically, are in such a precarious position today that economic survival will be difficult without major support of the federal government (Wintre & Jaffee, 2002). As a result of political and economic factors, the socioeconomic conditions Native Americans face today are devastating. These conditions have a direct and powerful impact on the higher education experience of Native American students as it pervades all facets of their lives (Shield, 2004).

Besides economic barriers, there are many social barriers to Native Americans as they pursue goals of enrollment in higher education programs and degree completion. The leaders of the American Indian Education Policy assert that the major reason for the lack of Native American presence in higher education and low degree attainment is the socioeconomic condition resulting from historical federal policy regarding Native Americans (American Indian Higher Education Consortium & Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1999).

Cultural Discontinuity

Cultural discontinuity is a concept that asserts that Native Americans experience reality in a completely different way than the dominant culture, and consequently, the magnitude of the incongruence of realities Native Americans often experience within the dominant culture can be devastating to Native Americans' sense of self and experience of being in the world (Agboo, 2001). This author posits that high dropout rates and low levels of academic achievement of Native American students are not due to the inability to adjust, to genetic inferiority, cultural impoverishment, or cultural differences but lie in cultural discontinuity. The cultural discontinuity experienced by Native American students within most educational environments often lies in the dominant culture's school settings' concept of time and space, discrepancies and distortions in the curriculum that combine to cause the low achievement of Native American students (Agboo, 2001).

Within the historical contexts, despite the socioeconomic conditions faced by Native Americans today and the cultural discontinuity experienced by Native Americans in Western educational systems, some Native Americans persist in higher education and complete degrees. Huffman (2001) described one perspective that serves to provide a foundational context to explain this: The Resistance Theory and Transcultural Hypothesis. This perspective is grounded in Native American traditional values of strength, resilience, and Indigenous identity intrinsic to Native American culture (Huffman, 2001).

Resistance Theory and Transcultural Hypothesis

According to Huffman, the major theme in this theory is the discrepancy between values, behaviors, or political/economic power of those with dominant status and those of minority status. He describes transcultured students as those who use their ethnic identity as a firm social-psychological anchor and display a confidence and sense of security that emerge from their American Indian identity as well as possessing a strong identification with traditional American Indian culture and have no desire to assimilate. He found that assimilated students have few or no problems with cultural conflict or cultural discontinuity with the mainstream higher education experience. Problems occur to some extent with marginal students. Students who are estranged from the university experience have significant to extreme difficulty, while transcultured students find strength in their Native American identity, cultural values, and spirituality to persist and move toward degree completion.

Huffman (2001) outlined four stages of an estrangement process that he discovered non-assimilated Native American students undergoing in their higher education experience: (1) alienation from the institution, (2) disillusionment with

the higher education experience, (3) emotional rejection, and (4) physical rejection.

Alienation from the institution. Initially, the non-assimilated Native American students experienced alienation from the institution and described feelings of not being able to relate with much at the institution or in their higher education experience at all.

Disillusionment. Disillusionment was characterized by increased feelings of alienation. Native American students at this stage held a strong perception that the university was an agent of assimilation in their lives.

Emotional rejection. This third stage was characterized by rejection of the institution and of the higher education experience by the Native American students that they perceived as necessary in order to reject assimilation. Feelings of alienation at this stage were extreme.

Physical rejection. This final stage, physical rejection or disengagement, resulted in Native American students withdrawing from the university after one or two semesters, not to return.

Of all the underrepresented groups studied, Native American students graduate from college with the lowest graduation rate of any other group of students as indicated in a report released from the U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (2004). This report regarding the graduation rates at four-year institutions by race/ethnicity and Carnegie classification in the United States for cohort year 1997 shows that the graduation rates of Native American students were the lowest of the four underrepresented populations in this study for all Carnegie classifications: (1) Doctoral Research Extensive, 46.9; (2) Doctoral Research Intensive, 35.3; (3) Master's Colleges and Universities I, 31.3; and (4) Master's Colleges and Universities II, 28.6. This compares with African American, Hispanic, and Asian students in the same categories respectively at: (a) African American 51.9, 35.9, 33.7, 27.3; (b) Hispanic 60.0, 39.6, 33.5, 43.2; and (c) Asian 74.2, 55.3, 43.5, 43.5. The only category where Native Americans outscored the other underrepresented populations was at the Master's Colleges and Universities II. Here Native Americans outranked African Americans 28.6 compared to 27.3. Table 1 displays this data.

Table 1

Percentage of Graduation Rates at four-Year Institutions by Race/Ethnicity, and Carnegie Classification: United States, Cohort Year 1997

Carnegie Classification	Total	African-American	Hispanic	Asian	Native American
Research/Extensive	67.0	51.9	60.0	74.2	46.0
Research/Intensive	50.5	35.9	39.6	55.3	35.3
Master's I	45.2	33.7	33.5	43.5	31.3
Master's II	48.3	27.3	63.4	72.7	28.6

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2004.

As stated in the beginning, retaining all students in institutions of higher learning remains an important goal for all postsecondary institutions (Astin, 2005). The legal decision in June 2003 for the practice of Affirmative Action in college and university admissions paves the way for postsecondary institutions to work to diversify their enrollments (Maloney & Berger, 2004). Studying race and ethnicity as factors in predicting graduation rates is not a new concept; however, as Orfield (2001) attests, court cases are dictating a need for compelling, hard evidence of the benefits of having diverse student bodies.

Students with backgrounds other than the majority culture (i.e. African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native

American) tend not to persist in college and do not graduate at the same rate (Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002); however, the four groups share some commonalities with students from the majority culture, both negative and positive. Negative commonalities are: (a) lack of academic preparedness, (b) lack of a critical mass of students with similar ethnic characteristics, (c) initial enthusiasm displayed by the recruitment process but subsequent disappointment once enrolled, and (d) financial need. Positive commonalities of the four groups include: (a) mentor programs, (b) financial aid, (c) groups and clubs for minority students, (d) summer pre-college attendance programs, (e) multicultural centers, and (f) inclusive and meaningful curriculum.

In addition to the background of the students, the characteristics of the institutions are also relevant to predicting graduation rates. Institutions differ in terms of their background and commitment of resources for education. For example, Goenner and Snaith (2003) state "an output of higher education, such as completions, is influenced not only by the quality and quantity of inputs (students), but also through the method (institutions) of production" (p. 410). They state further that these background characteristics (i.e., type, geographic location, mission of the institution) reflect that institutions may not share similar goals or means for addressing these goals. Programs for students that are designed to improve retention and graduation rates include service learning (Kuh, 2005), and specialized residential programs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Such programs are targeted at the activities of the individual student.

Summary

The research confirms that the retention of college students of underrepresented populations is complex and encompasses not only such issues as academic preparation but also commitment, belonging, and perseverance. Institutions of higher learning must be aware of the positive and negative commonalities shared by these students and consider the degree to which these factors impact their graduation rates.

University administrators and chief academic officers should spend considerable time, effort, and resources investigating non-academic factors related to students' departure from the university such as: (a) integration with the community, (b) financial aid versus scholarship support, (c) housing problems, (d) rejection of family and friends, (e) self-confidence, and (f) existence (or non-existence) of role models and mentors. Retention is complex and multi-dimensional and extends far beyond the academic qualifications of entering freshmen. Data must be further disaggregated to examine more of the personal and socio-cultural issues that impact student retention.

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