Examining the Commitment for College

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Introduction
Making the decision to attend college and going to college are pivotal, life-defining experiences. Recent changes in funding for higher education in Wisconsin makes the decision to attend an UW four-year institution even more challenging. This research project examines the influences on student’s decisions to attend higher education and the role parents play in the process of going to college. Further, we analyze the significance of social background characteristics and the connection to campus students made during their first year on student satisfaction with college and students’ continued commitment toward degree completion. This research is of importance as universities with declining budgets are trying harder than ever to recruit and retain students.

Background Literature & Concepts

△ Family Background:
Grotsky & Riegle-Crumb (2010) describe the term habitus, meaning students know without a doubt they will attend college following graduation from high school. Habitus is influenced by family background, especially social class, parental education level, parents’ educational expectations, and race.

△ Parental Involvement:
According to Cabrera & La Nasa (2000), parents are the biggest influence in the decision to go to college and where. Their involvement is both motivational and proactive. Parents motivate students by encouraging them to go to college, do well in their coursework, and graduate. Parents are proactive by having a continuing interest in their lives at college.

△ Student Retention in Higher Education:
Tinto’s (1975) model of student persistence examines student’s commitment to the institution and their degree. Background characteristics like family support and academic preparation influence their persistence. An important element of Tinto’s theory is the role of campus connection; the more students integrate themselves into academic and social systems in college, the more committed they will be. Students must perceive college as a worthwhile investment, and not see their time and money are better spent elsewhere. Interacting with campus faculty, peer groups, and extracurricular organizations resulted in students viewing their college education as a superior investment, were more likely to be persistent in obtaining their degree and be committed to their institution.

Method & Participants
We utilized a convenience sample of 81 first year students from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Data was collected through an anonymous survey distributed through email to students in five introductory classes in the College of Arts and Sciences.

△ 72.7% Female 27.3% Male
△ 88.9% White/Caucasian
△ 61.7% Parents have college degree or higher, 25.9% some college or two year degree, 12.3% high school or less
△ 66.7% UWEC was first choice for college
△ 59.3% Parents helping pay for college, 65.4% use their own money to help pay for college
△ From Wisconsin: 65.4%, From Minnesota: 28.4%

Satisfied with Attending UWEC
Significant positive association (p<.001) with overall satisfaction with being at UWEC included:
• Parental involvement in the college the application process
• Feeling connected at UWEC
• Feeling safe at UWEC
• Parents’ educational expectations to graduate from college

Interestingly, students whose parents had completed a bachelor’s degree were less satisfied with their decision to attend UWEC.

Expect to Graduate from UWEC
Significant positive association (p<.001) with expecting to graduate from UWEC included:
• UWEC “Feels like home”
• Feeling safe at UWEC
• Parents’ educational expectations to graduate from college
• Parents are assisting with paying for college

Negatively associated with expectations to graduate from UWEC included student frequent travel home during their first semester and using their own money to help pay for college.

Parental Involvement and College

We asked a series of questions about parental involvement. Before college:
• 67.7% said parents were very involved or involved in the application process
• 42% of students said their parents strongly influenced their decision to attend college; only 11% said same of the decision to attend UWEC
• 77.8% said parents were involved in the process of going to college the right amount

While at college:
• 24% strongly agreed that parents “expect me to be independent while at college”
• 49.1% said “I communicate with my parents at least 4-6x week”
• 51.9% said “I talk to my parents if I am having a bad day”

Significant associations were found between parental involvement and parental education. Parents with a baccalaureate college degree were more involved in the process of going to college and had more influence in the decisions about college attendance. These students also were more likely to say their parents were involved the right amount, that parents expect them to be independent at college, and that UWEC was their first choice of college.

Greater parental involvement in the application process was associated with greater satisfaction with the choice of UWEC. In an open ended question some respondents said that “my parents know my personality” and “my parents know what I need” as what they liked about their parents’ involvement in the process.

Budget Cuts?
In open ended questions, student were asked, “What do you like most about attending UWEC” and “If you could change anything about UWEC, what would it be?”

Like best
• #1 People friendly and welcoming climate

Want to change
• #1 Problems associated with budget cuts

Minnesota parents were more influential in their children’s decision to attend higher education in comparison to Wisconsin parents, but less informed about the budget cuts in Wisconsin and less concerned about the cuts to Wisconsin universities. Only 17.7% of Wisconsin students said the cuts influenced their decision to attend UWEC and only 4.3% of Minnesota students said so. However, out of state students were less satisfied with their decision to attend UWEC and more likely to discuss budget cuts and the negative consequences of the budget cuts in the open ended question.

Discussion and Conclusion
Parenting and higher education has significantly changed since the development of the classical theories about student retention in higher education. Our research suggests that developing connections to the campus community remains essential to overall student satisfaction and degree commitment. In addition, parents today are very involved in the decision making process about college.

Parents with baccalaureate degrees were reported to have greater involvement and influence in college decision. However, these students are also less satisfied with attending UWEC. Why? Could it be due to changes in higher education since their parents attended? Perhaps these students have greater expectations of the institution.

We recognize that our sample is small and that by only studying first-year students it is difficult to examine perseverance and commitment to higher education. Our hopes are to use what we learn from a longitudinal study using a random sample. Given the dramatic changes in higher education, we believe it is important to study and document what ways these changes could impact families and students.

Sources

Methodology

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