Increasing Student Retention Among College Students

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Abstract
Retention among college students is one of the biggest challenges facing colleges today. This research combines mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to determine factors that might allow colleges to better retain students. I find early risk indicators of students dropping out of college, and also some factors which serve as signals that can lead to retaining a student. Using statistics from a medium-sized Midwestern state institution, and combining them with student interviews, I find that academic support mechanisms, student GPA, and scholarships are the major factors affecting student retention.

Introduction & Literature Review
Student retention is one of the biggest and most important challenges facing colleges today. There are still a surprising number of students that do not return for their second year at college. There have been many studies in the area of student retention, and in many ways this study will support existing findings, while applying them to a new sample and some unique institutional factors. I use mixed qualitative and quantitative analyses to answer the specific question of why students drop out of college, and how policies and programs might be improved to better retain them in the future.

College degrees help our whole society, from reducing unemployment rates to reducing levels of criminal activity (Singell, Waddell 2010, Mbuva 2011). Students obtaining college degrees will lower our unemployment rate in our nation, this is of vital importance. “Nationwide, 22% of first-year college students do not return for their sophomore year. Graduation and retention rates still remain low, even though enrollments are increasing,” (Morrow, Ackermann 2012). With the current retention rates the
way they are, an update on research is needed to see if there is anything to add to the current data.

The first step in unlocking the secrets to student retention is finding out first why students leave. “Previous research has found that attrition and retention rates differ by educational level, age of the student, level of course, course subject, socio-economic group and institution” (Yorke 1999, Johnes & McNabb 2004 & Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor & Lauder 2010). Students can leave a university for a variety of other reasons as well: academic difficulty, adjustment problems, uncertain goals, lack of commitment, inadequate finances, lack of student involvement in campus activities, and generally a poor fit to the institution (Morrow, Ackermann 2012, Adams 2011). Some of the main variables that can lead to retaining a student involve their pre-entry attributes and what their goals are when they reach college. Having a strong academic pathway that is clear and concise to students will likely cause them to want to stay at the institution (Mbuva 2011, Cerezo, McWhirter 2012).

Despite the variety of factors that have been identified as leading to the retention or non-retention of students, there are three common themes in the existing research. One of these is the idea that peer involvement is a major factor in who stayed in a program. The relationships between students are a very important attribute in who is retained at a certain institution. (Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor and Lauder 2010). This concept was brought up in most of the literature as a significant contribution in a student’s decision to stay at an institution for another year. It likely means that having peer involvement and friends throughout college allows the student to feel more involved and comfortable in college.

Another common theme is the area of academic support. “Students who are the happiest and academically the most successful have developed a solid relationship with an academic advisor, a faculty member or an administrator who can help them navigate the academic and social shoals of the academy,” (Drake 2011). The paper stated that it was hard to determine whether or not there was some measure to define “solid academic advising,” nevertheless, this is an important factor in student success.

Finally, the idea of having a healthy environment comes into account when thinking about retaining a student. Atmosphere
is a big component to bring more support to the students directly (Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor and Lauder 2010). There are many reasons why a student would stay in the residence hall the following year, including the ability to have a decent dining plan, where the dorm was located on campus, the ability to choose what dorm you want to live in, and the different utilities that a student can get while living in the dorm. Some negatives that would drive students away from living in a dorm were the inability to cook meals, the length of the housing contract, the inability to have a private bathroom, parking accommodations, and the ability to live with or near a friend. (Li, Sheely, Whalen 2005).

Academic support, peer support and a healthy atmosphere are the main variables that will enable a student to succeed not only in the classroom but outside as well. One question to ask is how do colleges address these factors to ensure that they will have high retention rates? Another is how do students view these three main themes the literature pointed out and did they really have any contribution to their leaving the institution?

Some other methods have been used to increase student retention, including higher academic entry qualifications have been one of those changes (Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor and Lauder 2010). Students are more likely to succeed and be retained when they are also the ones who work hard and earn good grades. College, therefore, are increasingly looking at increasing the rigor of admissions criteria to increase their student retention.

“It seems essential for universities to maximize the links and supports that already exist on campuses and to do so in more consistent and systematic ways for all incoming students, especially students traditionally underrepresented on college campuses” (Cerzo, McWhirter 2012). For students to truly succeed on a campus, college administrators must take the steps to assist the students. That doesn’t necessarily mean creating programs that will just give the student more work, but helping the student build a community both academically and socially. As the literature has illustrated, student retention is a problem that doesn’t seem be going away, and attrition is still alarmingly high among college freshmen. The sooner the problem is fixed the better our future as a society can become as fewer resources will be wasted and a more efficient path through college can be
achieved. It is up to the institutions to take the necessary steps to ensure that the environment they come into as freshmen is one that is welcoming and that their admitted classes are a good fit with the strengths and weaknesses of a given program.

This project seeks not only to show aggregate trends in major contributing factors that lead to student retention, as well as warning signals for potential non-retention, but also to find individual level factors from students themselves and discover what they feel was a significant point that caused them to leave. Was it one of the three main points that the literature covered or was there another reason why these students transferred or dropped out? In my literature research, the voice from the students themselves was often missing, and that is one key contribution provided by this study. This will hopefully allow a richer understanding of the issues beyond the broad demographic trends. For instance, if professors are a factor which causes a student to stay or leave, the goal with my research is to find out what they feel could be done better by the professors, or administration to help them stay at their current institution.

**Methodology & Results**

This research is a mixed-methods study including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Northern State University provided data about all incoming freshman from 2006-2011 and followed them through their college years. The data had an array of information including GPA, ACT scores, high school GPA, etc. All names were removed and replaced with random identification numbers. Regression analysis was conducted to examine significant factors that would show why a student left an institution.

I also conducted interviews, and found my initial interview subjects through connections made via professors. I then used a snowball sampling method to expand my pool of interviewees. My interview questions revolved around issues of academic support, peer support, and the college environment. All interviews were transcribed and coded to find any common themes.
Table 1 shows my main regression results exploring the factors affecting a student’s retention. The dependent variable was a binary indicator for students who were not retained at the institution. The stars represent the significance level in the data. One star ( * ) being significant at the ten percent level, two stars ( ** ) being significant at the five percent level, and three stars ( *** ) being significant at the one percent level. The results show that College GPA is estimated to be a negative but significant factor in student attrition. The higher the GPA the more likely a student will be retained at the institution. Scholarships in general are significant and gaining a scholarship will increase the likelihood of retention. Distance from home is significant, and positive, meaning the farther away from home a student is, the less likely he or she will be retained.

These data findings are important since they show what an institution can keep in mind when a student enters college. If a student has a lower GPA in high school, this student would need more help in college to bump up their grades and be retained. If a student has trouble with financial support, then more scholarships could help their retention. Along with this, extra support can be given to students with lower ACT scores and students who live farther away from home, to all improve retention rates.

In my interviews several themes emerged that further supported the literature, including academic support, peer support, and a comfortable environment. Students felt that academic support is important in a college. Students leave for a variety of reasons that the school can’t control: Money, sick, or the college doesn’t have the major. One problem some of my
interviewees stated were not having a major, or they lost interest in the ones current ones they had. At the same time, they felt that certain aspects of a school were important and would have kept them at the institution. Academic support is a huge factor in why a student would not feel welcome or comfortable at a college, or return to a college if they had the ability to return. Students want to be more than just a face in the crowd. They are looking for a sense of belonging at the institution. Through their academic support, that sense of belonging can be established. The relationships with the professors and advisors could potentially create an environment that makes the student feel like they belong at the school, and equally as important makes them want to try much harder.

One student commented in particular highlights this idea that students want to be guided more by an adviser. “She would send out an e-mail to however many advisees cause I didn’t declare a major. Which might have been different if you would have declared, maybe there wouldn’t have been as many students but she had a lot of advisees. And so…she would send out this mass email. That would be like you can come meet with me but I would prefer to meet via email. And I was like ok…sure you know. I ended up taking a math class because I didn’t know what my major was going be so I was going to take the minimum requirements and taking a class that didn’t even count towards generals. It was below that, it was super easy but I registered without anyone helping me.”

The ability to have clear guidance is something that students find very important in their institution. Having that advisor there for help, makes students feel like they are on the right path, and that they will leave college alright in the end. Students want to try when they are surrounded by professors and advisors that care.

Looking at another example of how there was a problem with the sense of belonging on campus, one student reflected how they went to class of 300-400 students, and the teacher never took attendance. All there would be is a swipe of their campus card, and a throw-away quiz question. That was their attendance for that day. The professor didn’t even need to know the name of the student. It stripped all identity from the student and made them only a face in a crowd full of students, which none of my interviewees felt was a good learning environment.
In addition to academic support in the form of personalized advising and personal relationships with professors, peer support is also another factor that leads student to actually want to stay at an institution. Most of my interviewees had no problems meeting friends. They had groups they were a part of, and with these groups it made the decision even harder to leave an institution. These groups can be created in an academic setting, or in a non-academic setting. Having the ability to work with a student inside a class room is probably one of the easiest ways that a student can get involved with his classmates, plus, students actually don’t mind working on homework in class together. Some pointed out the case can arise they had an easier time leaving an institution if they didn’t have any friends, and couldn’t find any sense of belonging in both the peer and academic support.

On the other hand, not finding a group of friends might make it easier for a student to decide to leave. If you don’t find your group of friends or that clique, they may find it easier to leave the college in search for another institution, or find it easier to say that they wouldn’t go back if they left for some other reason that wasn’t the direct result of anything lacking in the institution. For example, one interviewee stated that the school was really “cliquey”, and that caused her not to meet a lot of friends. In one of my interviews, the subject stated that since they never formed a clique they and enhanced by never being satisfied with where they were with the program, therefore, they never felt the need to stay at the college.

The students I interviewed had mostly positive things to say about the environment the university created for them. The significant factors for students were the location and the proximity of the campus to home. Some of them stated that it was an added bonus that the campus was close to home, which supports my quantitative data. At the same time, no one said that distance from home was a significant reason for them to leave. The location of the campus was important, however. One student in particular did not want to feel trapped on a campus and the ability to move on and off campus was very important for them as a student. They even mentioned that the closest thing to the campus was a gas station, seven miles from campus so there was not much to do. It created an environment that was less welcoming and more boring.
Conclusion

Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches provides a very different and more complete picture of why a student leaves a particular institution. My quantitative results can show what a university can do before a student enters college, and my qualitative results can show what a student can do currently when they are at college. If a student’s home is far away from the campus, half way across the country for example, they should be provided more academic support and advisement to increase the likelihood of retention. Also, if a student had a lower GPA in high school, or a lower ACT comp score, they should be provided more academic support as well. Students should be helped as much as possible to find a major, so not only do they have a sense of where they are going, but so that they can also meet peers that have the same interests. Students should be told about all the scholarships that the university provides through their advisement, and should be pushed to take these scholarships to help them out financially.

Keeping students in college is important. It helps out our society as a whole, and it can change a student’s life for the better. Leaving everything you know to take a risk at a college is not an easy step, which is why it is so important for the college to do all they can to make the student feel like they belong at the school, to make them feel at home. If we, as a society, can crack that code, retention of students will change for the better.

References
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