A PERSISTENCE MODEL FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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A considerable amount of effort is expended encouraging students to enroll in higher education programs. It is, therefore, disappointing to all concerned when students fail to complete their programs. It is even more distressing when one particular group of enrollees is identified as failing to persist with their studies at a disproportionately high rate. This was the issue faced by Kennedy-King College during the early 1990s. The African American male, nontraditional student (either more than 24 years old, or part-time enrollee, or live off campus), was identified in this category with the withdrawal/departure behavior becoming a serious and increasing problem.

Kennedy-King College is a non-residential, two-year community college located in a neighborhood of Chicago that is predominantly African American (97%), low income (70% below the poverty level), with a comparatively high crime rate and a public school system that has been described as "somewhat ineffective." More than 30% of the students are residents of this community.

The study consisted of a literature review; consideration of the variables identified from the review that had previously been thought to affect student persistence; quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis carried out with the African American male students; the development and testing of a persistence model incorporating previous and newly identified variables; and the development of a college strategy designed to increase the persistence of these students.

The problem that prompted this study was the low level of persistence of the African American "nontraditional" (either more than 24 years old, or a part-time enrollee, or live off campus) male student in urban community colleges, and the resultant high rate of departure before they complete their specified goals. In the 20-year period from 1970 to 1990, this problem increased dramatically in the City Colleges of Chicago. In 1970, the ratio of male to female enrollees was 1:1, and the ratio of male to female certificate/degree earners was 1:2. In 1990,

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these ratios were 1:1.5 for enrollees and 1:4 for certificate/degrees received.

The purpose of this study was to develop a model of persistence for African American male urban community college students based on previous research into student persistence enhanced by detailed analyses of the data obtained from the Kennedy-King College community during 1992-93. This model was used to develop modes of action, program enhancements, and activities within the college to increase the persistence level of the students.

This study examined variables that had previously been identified as having a possible relationship to the persistence/attrition behavior of university students. In particular, it considered variables that have been used to develop predictive models of persistence behavior. These consisted of the following:

- **background variables**: age, enrollment status, educational goals, and high school performance;
- **academic variables**: study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability; and
- **environmental variables**: finances, employment, outside encouragement, family responsibility, and opportunity to transfer.

The variables also have to be viewed in context, taking into account the factors influencing the neighborhood surrounding Kennedy-King college. More than 70% of the community residents are below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992; Wilson, 1987). Violent crime is at a high level when compared to other communities in the Chicago area. In the first 11 months of 1991, there were 96 homicides, 1,456 shootings, 729 stabbings, and 1,421 serious beatings with other weapons such as baseball bats and hammers (Englewood, 1991). The reported violence has decreased from this level but it is still ever present. The average percentage of students at or above national norms in the high schools that feed the college is only 8.6% in reading comprehension and 8.4% for mathematics (Chicago Public Schools, 1996). In short, the community from which most of the students come, and in which Kennedy-King is located, is plagued by massive joblessness, flagrant lawlessness, and low achieving schools.

These local factors are in accord with the wider issues identified on a national level (Gibbs, 1988; Jones, 1989). Problems related to economics (few, if any jobs), prior education (poor elementary and secondary school achievement), drugs and alcohol use, criminal activ-
ity, family, and individual stress all have substantial adverse effects on the African American male and are a major part of his environment that he brings with him on entering college.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Community college students in general have a higher attrition rate than students in residential colleges and universities (Brent & Karabel, 1989). Nontraditional students generally have a lower program completion rate than do traditional students (Astin et al., 1982). Lower socioeconomic African American students, especially men, are found in some empirical studies to have higher attrition rates than most other groups of students in higher education.

Early studies of traditional college student withdrawal/retention behavior were primarily descriptive. They described the phenomenon but did not offer reasons why or how variables related. During the past two decades, 1970 to 1990, four significant theoretical models of student withdrawal/retention behavior were developed. Three focused on traditional students (Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975), and the fourth focused on nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Spady began the process of developing conceptual models of college student retention and withdrawal/departure behavior (Spady, 1970). He used a model based on Durkheim's theory of suicide (Durkheim, 1951) to provide a frame for summarizing the research. He looked at the match between the students' expectations, previous background, and ability, and the influences of the university environment (Spady, 1971). He believed that the interaction of university environment and student background, if positive, enhances the social interactions and increases the likelihood of persistence. If the interaction is not positive, the social interactions will be impeded, and the student may commit educational suicide by leaving higher education.

Tinto's (1975) model of student attrition was built on Spady's earlier concepts. He argued that the process of departure from college is a longitudinal one and that the decision will be based on the acceptance, or rejection, of the academic and social systems of the university. This model is the most widely cited in the literature and has provided the basis for many attrition studies (Bean, 1980, 1981, 1992; Halpin, 1990; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Munro, 1981; Pascarella et al., 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1980, 1983).

Pascarella (1980) developed a general conceptual model that concentrated on the factors that the university could influence and
control in order to increase the contact between student and faculty outside the normal classroom setting.

Each of the three models discussed has the importance of student integration into the social and academic systems of the institution as its underlying construct. In addition, each model was developed and conceptualized for traditional college students in residential settings.

Bean and Metzner (1985) presented their model to explain nontraditional student attrition. According to them, the

one defining characteristic of the nontraditional student was the lack of social integration into the institution; therefore, a different theory must be used to link the variables in this model.

The model (Figure 1) indicates that departure decisions will be based primarily on three sets of variables: academic, background, and environmental. It is a well-developed model that can be used to investigate the persistence/withdrawal behavior of nontraditional college students. The authors point out that for 2-year colleges, theory based research was almost totally absent. They suggested that at 2- and 4-year commuter institutions, further research was needed with nontraditional students that was based on a theory, it does not emphasize social integration, and it includes variables from students' external environments. My study was undertaken to help fill this void in the

**FIGURE 1** Conceptual model for African American male urban community college student persistence (Adapted from Bean & Metzner, 1985). key: \( \rightarrow \) Direct effects; \( \rightarrow \) Direct effects presumed most important.
research and to specifically include urban community colleges in the theoretical analysis.

METHOD

In order to develop a model of persistence, a casual/comparative design that used a cross sequential data sampling was used. A survey instrument was developed to obtain quantitative and qualitative data, and structured interviews were conducted in order to obtain additional qualitative data.

In the fall of 1992, 205 new African American male students enrolled at Kennedy-King college. Several attempts were made to reach all of these students, and 93 were interviewed. Eight students participated in lengthy, in-depth interviews designed to obtain detailed information about their perceptions of their old and new environments. A balance was maintained between those students who left after one semester and those who continued for the second semester. One hundred twenty-three students left after the first term, and 47 were interviewed, including four lengthy interviews. Eighty-two students returned for the second term, and 46 (four lengthy) were interviewed. I generally met the students at the local McDonalds, a "safe" and neutral location one block from the campus.

The data for student persistence is presented in Table 1. Those students who did not complete the fall semester were given a value of 0.0; those that completed the fall term were given the value 1.0; those students who finished the fall term and began the spring term were given the 1.5 value; and those students who finished both fall and spring terms were given the value 2.0.

The primary method of analysis included a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the ratio and interval data and the Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA for the categorical data. The means and standard deviations were calculated where appropriate. The relationships between persistence and all of the variables considered are presented in Table 2.

A PROPOSED MODEL OF PERSISTENCE

Based on this quantitative and qualitative analysis, a modified model of student persistence was proposed (Figure 2). The model is an attempt to schematically show and explain the inter-relationships between the three sets of variables, the two sets of outcomes, the
### TABLE 1 Student Persistence Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persistence Value</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This sample was not large enough to be included in the analysis.

### TABLE 2 Relationship of Persistence to Withdrawal/Departure Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>H Statistic</th>
<th>F Ratio</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days absent</td>
<td>27.05726</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours studying</td>
<td>19.9473</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major certainty</td>
<td>5.5931</td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Habits/skills</td>
<td>5.0511</td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course availability</td>
<td>2.2165</td>
<td></td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic advise</td>
<td>0.0224</td>
<td></td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education goal</td>
<td>11.4588</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled status</td>
<td>2.2808</td>
<td></td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.5064</td>
<td></td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school performance</td>
<td>0.5733</td>
<td></td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College cost</td>
<td>23.0710</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family finances</td>
<td>12.6583</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition payment</td>
<td>5.9056</td>
<td></td>
<td>Weakly negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness/hopelessness</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment set</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.5924</td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family responsibility</td>
<td>2.9451</td>
<td></td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer ability</td>
<td>1.1204</td>
<td></td>
<td>None found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic outcome</td>
<td></td>
<td>24.5847</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade point average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological outcome</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal progress</td>
<td>57.9588</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal completion</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>11.2830</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal internalization</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6.2680</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>9.0252</td>
<td>Strongly positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
intent to leave behavior, and the persistence of African/American male students.

The one background variable that was statistically significant was educational goals. High levels of certainty of educational goals were found to lead to lower absenteeism, to longer hours of study, and to a greater certainty of major, which yields higher values for grade point average (GPA), which is negatively related to intent to leave and strongly positively related to persistence. These positive values for the academic variables also lead to positive values for the psychological outcome variables, which lead to increased persistence.

The two most complex sets of variables in this study are the set of environmental variables and those variables related to the psychological outcomes. Most of the students have similar financial need, similar levels of encouragement and/or discouragement, and similar family responsibilities. The main discriminating factor appears to be how each student perceives his environment. Those that have clearly articulated educational goals have a positive approach to their environment (both community and college) and a low level of helplessness/hopelessness. This leads to a high level of satisfaction, lower stress, greater goal commitment, and the ability to internalize those goals. All of this leads directly to a higher persistence level. On the other hand, if they are unsure of their goals, they perceive themselves negatively, their helplessness/hopelessness level will be high, and this leads to an increased desire to leave.
Most of the respondents indicated that the decision to enroll in college was a major one for them. How they perceive their relationship to this new environment and their propensity to succeed within it will affect their decision to persist.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE STRATEGY TO INCREASE PERSISTENCE**

The variables that were found to have a significant influence on the students that could be used to develop a proactive strategy to increase persistence were identified as follows:

—Educational Goals. The clearer the students were about what they wanted to be or to achieve, and the greater their depth of goal internalization, the more likely they were to persist. This result was built into staff training programs to improve the effectiveness of counseling and mentoring.

—Outside Encouragement. The more support the student had received from outside the college (this was generally found to be from a significant female—mother, girlfriend, wife), the more likely the student was to persist. Again, staff were alerted to this factor and gave active encouragement to students to share their educational experiences with their family and friends.

—Utility. If a student really believed the program would benefit his future, the more likely he will persist. Encouragement from alumni and mentors was invaluable in improving this area of student counseling.

—The Helplessness/Hopelessness Factor. This newly identified factor summarized the belief of many students that no matter what they did or achieved they would not get a job or be successful. Again, by making staff aware of this factor, appropriate counseling and mentorship could be put in place to increase the students' desire to persist. The services of the job placement office were critical in this area.

The following activities were strengthened and coordinated with greater focus as a result of the research.

1. Coordinated Advising that takes into account student placement test scores, choice of academic major, and enrollment status. This also includes counseling and assisting students in study habits/skills, utility, goal commitment, and internalization.
2. Academic skills workshops that instruct the student in library usage, computer literacy and appropriate study techniques.
3. Financial aid workshops that explain benefits and provide support with form filling.
4. Job placement and transfer seminars to assist students in developing definite plans and procedures for transferring to University, further education, or employment.
5. Faculty and staff development workshops to improve work skills, to assist in improving staff attitudes, and to clearly define the role of faculty/staff in addressing student needs.
6. Student activities and security to ensure that students feel safe on campus and see their community college as a place for social as well as academic activity.
7. Excellence in educational outreach, which encourages senior staff and faculty of the college to go into the community to inform the residents of what the college can provide, and to establish what new programs or services may be needed.
8. Institutional research to establish data on students to determine their needs, desires, expectations, and perceptions. The results are shared with faculty and support staff so that they can serve the students more effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following are recommendations for further study. This study should be replicated at other community colleges with student demographics similar to those of Kennedy-King. Studies that include both African American male and female students should be conducted to determine why there are differences in their persistence and completion rates. Finally, this study indicates that there is a real need for retention research by these urban colleges. Because of the nature of community colleges, their enrollment may always be more fluid than that of four year colleges and universities, but attempts to discover why students do or do not persist can add clarity to both institutional effectiveness and mission.

REFERENCES


