

## **Measuring Interpersonal Components of Student Persistence in the Freshman Year Experience: Learning Who Cares and Who Can Help**

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Student persistence to graduation is a major area of concern for colleges and universities (Henscheid, 2000; Herndon, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). Most college officials do not know why their students are leaving higher education (Cope & Hannah, 1975) or understand the contributing process (Tinto, 1975). Approximately 65% of high school graduates enroll in a college or university (Henscheid, 2000). One third to one half of the colleges and universities admit over 90% of their applicants, and the dropout rates from the freshman to sophomore year of school are one third to one half (Moreno, 1998; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Four out of every 10 students who enter a higher education institution in the United States will graduate in 4 years (Moreno, 1998; Pantages & Creedon, 1978). Approximately 75% of the students who leave their first higher education institution will never receive a college degree (Cuseo, 1991).

A student's social and interpersonal environments, which include peers and faculty, are important factors in student persistence (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hibel, 1978). Peers have a powerful influence on a student's academic success (Astin, 1993). Peers tend to influence social integration and have a stronger positive influence on women persisting in school than men. The quality of the peer relationships is more important to women than men (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). The values and attitudes exerted by the various peer groups are important in predicting student persistence (Pantages & Creedon, 1978). Peer norms have direct and indirect effects on student persistence (Bank, Slavings, & Biddle, 1990). Kanoy and Bruhn's (1996) study showed that the peer relationships formed by the students who participated in a living/learning residence hall program may have helped them adjust to college. Their academic performance and involvement were enhanced, which lead to higher grade point averages and persistence rates than for students not participating in a living/learning residence hall.

Next to peer relationships, student-faculty relationships exert a major influence over a student's

intellectual and personal growth (Astin, 1993). A variety of student-faculty interactions have a positive influence on student success during college. However, the inaccessibility of faculty has a negative effect (Pascarella, 1984; Pascarella et al., 1978). Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) found that the range of student-faculty interactions has a stronger positive influence for men than women. Pascarella, Terenzini, and Hibel's (1978) study found that the first few student informal interactions with a faculty member were the most important, and nonclassroom student-faculty contact may influence student success. Faculty members have an impact on a student's social and academic integration (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1982).

A challenge for faculty and students is good academic advising, and the institution in this study knows academic advising is important. The Academic Advising Committee (2003) at this university noted the importance of academic advisers "...building a service culture that is student-centered" (p. 1). The committee stated that advising is not just scheduling, and it needs to be a continual process consisting of more than just 1 week of academic advising. Good academic advising has an underestimated impact on a student's college experience.

Advisers have the opportunity to change the quality of a student's education, but the most important contribution an adviser can make is to encourage students to join a campus organization or group (Light, 2001). Organizational memberships are important to academic success, especially for minority students (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995). "Faculty may be strong models for intellectual growth, but peers may be the primary models for personal/social and value-related outcomes" (Endo & Harpel, 1982, p. 133).

What happens during the freshman year is important (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Institutions interested in raising student persistence rates need to look at ways to improve academic advising and ways to incorporate peer

involvement (Bank et al., 1990). Students form connections which are essential to their academic success (Astin, 1984; Berger, 1997; Upcraft, 1985), and they act according to their feelings, emotions, and desires (Summerskill, 1962). This study examined the association of peer relationships between students living in the same on-campus residence hall and students not living in the same on-campus residence hall. A list of personality characteristics that students perceive as important traits in an academic adviser was developed.

There is a need for more research on retention and the isolation of the contributing factors (Fidler & Hunter, 1989). Research has shown that students who are socially integrated by forming peer relationships, interacting with faculty members, and getting involved with campus activities are more likely to remain in college than those students who are not socially integrated (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Tinto, 1975). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of some of the components of the Freshman Year Experience program at a state university in Georgia. This study was a formative evaluation that focused on the academic and social integration of the students. The variables included in this study were the perception of the ideal adviser, the perception of who cares and who matters to the student, involvement in campus activities, formation of peer relationships, grade point averages, and student persistence. This study measured some common variables from past studies, and more difficult but important elements that were usually neglected. These elements included hard-to-measure qualities such as caring and influence from advisers and other people in a student's life.

College freshmen face multiple challenges and a support community is important. Freshmen (n=114) were surveyed using a Q-Sort describing interpersonal influences in their lives and the ACL to describe their ideal adviser. Family influences and an adviser profile emerged. Implications include the selection of advisers, coordination of helping resources on and beyond the immediate college community, campus community intervention strategies, and inclusion of support systems in treatment planning for students in distress.

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