

Community College Retention of Hispanic Students: The Study of an Orientation Course

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Retaining minority students is extremely important because of the steady increase in their enrollment, and is a topic of concern for community colleges and higher education in general (Brotherton, 2001; "Hispanics Trail," 1994; "Kettering Minority," 1999; Magner, 1989; Martinez, 1998; "Officials Look," 2000; Perdomo, 2003; Ross, 1991; Valladares, 2003; Watson, 1998; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). The most salient factors influencing student retention are students' field of study, residential hall living, institutional size, high school class rank, part-time on-campus employment, and time of application in the admission process (Astin, 1984, 1997; Reisberg, 1999). Minority students face additional retention barriers, identified as financial difficulties, academic under-preparedness, social acculturation, and campus socialization.

Financial difficulties often are cited as the cause of minority student dropout (Brotherton, 2001; Chenoweth, 1999; "Hispanics Trail," 1994; "Kettering Minority," 1999; "Officials Look," 2000; Ross, 1991; Valladares, 2003) as they leave higher educational institutions because of insufficient funding to continue, and because their family lacks basic economic resources. The main challenge surrounding financial difficulties is convincing minority students to focus on the long-term gains of education versus the short-term gains of obtaining employment and making money in the present (Chenoweth, 1999). Remedial education is the focus of many minority retention programs (Brotherton, 2001; Congos & Schoeps, 1997; Finley, 2002; "Kettering Minority," 1999; Magner, 1989; Martinez, 1998; Parker, 1999; Perdomo, 2003; Reisberg, 1999; Roach, 1999; Snell & Makeis, 1993). Martinez (1998) and Reisberg (1999) discuss the misconception that curricula should be "watered down" to better serve underprepared students. Lastly, minority student attrition is influenced by inadequate campus acculturation and socialization (Brotherton, 2001; "Hispanics Trail," 1994; "Kettering Minority," 1999; Magner, 1989; "Officials Look," 2000; Perdomo, 2003; Ross, 1991; Valladares, 2003; Martinez, 1998; Watson, 1998; Wild & Ebbers, 2002), feeling isolated ("Officials look," 2000; Watson, 1998; Wild & Ebbers, 2002), and feeling unwelcome on campus (Magner, 1989; Ross, 1991; Watson, 1998). Inadequate social and campus acculturation and feeling unwelcome and isolated hinder minority students' building of necessary bridges with faculty and staff who could offer role modeling, guidance, and navigational assistance on campus.

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Understanding the aforementioned retention barriers will increase minority student matriculation within both community colleges and higher education in general. *Hispanic Times Magazine* (2000) reported that one in three minority students will earn a degree after his or her initial enrollment. *Black Issues in Higher Education* (2000) reported that minority enrollments lag behind majority students and that the success or failure of minority students can be based on the first six weeks of their enrollment.

Minority student enrollments, however, differ according to racial background. For instance, approximately 16% of college bound Hispanic students attend 4-year institutions ("Hispanics Trail," 1994; Perdomo, 2003). But Valladares (2003) asserted that Hispanic students are more likely to enroll in 2-year institutions, meaning that there could be a higher proportion of Hispanic students attending community colleges versus 4-year institutions. Hispanic students maintain higher enrollments, lower graduation rates (Valladares, 2003), and higher dropout rates (Martinez, 1998) as compared to white and other minority students.

Could participating in an orientation course assist in decreasing Hispanic student dropout rates and increase Hispanic student graduation rates? Carnevale (2002), Waschull (2001), and Derby and Smith (2004) addressed attrition and retention issues at both the university and community college level. Orientation programs that are designed to facilitate student acclimation to campus, goal setting, and relationship building appear to illustrate differences between enrolled and nonenrolled students within orientation courses. The purpose of this study was to examine if success for graduation, dropout status, stop-out status, and academic persistence was different for Hispanic students who participated in an orientation course versus those who did not.

Method

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 545 Hispanic students attending a midwestern community college from the fall semester of 1999 through the spring semester of 2002. The median age of the students was 25. The gender balance was approximately equal (50.4% women and 49.6% men). The mean GPA was 1.03 on a 4.0 scale.

Three cohorts were used in this study. The first cohort consisted of students who enrolled in the fall of 1999 and graduated in the spring of 2001. The second cohort consisted of students who enrolled in the fall of 2000 and graduated in the spring of 2002. The third cohort consisted of students who enrolled after the fall of 1998 and graduated by the spring of 2002.

Procedures

The instrument used for this study consisted of students' gender, ethnic background, age, chosen major, declared major, GPA, degree obtained, major upon graduation, semester of graduation, certificate obtained, number of hours transferred to the

institution, transfer institution, number of semesters enrolled, average credit hours attempted per semester, first term enrolled, length of interruption of enrollment, if a student returned first fall semester after initial enrollment, if a student returned the second fall semester after initial enrollment, and total number of hours completed. The database was developed and maintained by the Department of Information Technology (IT). These data were compiled in the fall 2003 semester by IT from various admissions, records, and registration administrative forms and applications.

Dependent Variables (retention measures)

The following operational definitions (Derby and Smith, 2004) determined a) success, b) dropout status, c) stop-out status, and d) student persistence. Success (a) was defined as completing the requirements of a transferable degree within a 2-year period. Dropout (b) was defined as completing fewer than three semesters of course work within a 2-year period, having an average load of three or more courses, and a GPA of less than 2.0 (on a 4.0 scale). Stop-out (c) was defined as completing three or more semesters of coursework, having an average load of three or more courses, a GPA greater than 2.0 (on a 4.0 point scale), and also re-enrolling after an enrollment break of one, two, or three semesters. Student persistence (d) was defined as having an average load of three or more courses and completing four semesters of course work within the 2-year period without completing the requirements for a transferable degree.

Independent Variable

The independent variable in this study represents the treatment of an orientation course. The design of this course was to facilitate self-development through a variety of exercises and activities relating to students' personal and educational development. Students met in small groups to examine their abilities, aptitudes, interests, values, and attitudes, as well as to explore how these factors related to their personal and educational development. This course, consisting of students in their transition into the college environment, encouraged success and attainment of goals, and sought to foster relationships that would help facilitate this success. As noted in Derby and Smith (2004), objectives for this course were to (a) create a successful and satisfying experience in college; (b) familiarize students with college resources, services, policies, and organizations; (c) build a network of support to enhance academic success; (d) develop an academic plan outlining the courses necessary to attain individual goals; (e) develop an awareness of the career development and decision-making process; and (f) encourage personal and student development. Due to low participation rates in evening and online course offerings, only those students identified as having taken the orientation course during the daytime were selected for this study.

Quantitative methods were employed in this study. The Pearson chi-square procedure was applied to address the differences between orientation course enrollment and Hispanic student retention. Chi-square statistical procedures test for associations between dichotomous variables and overall goodness-of-fit. Thus, chi-square indicates general associations between variables and cannot designate causality between variables.

Results

The Pearson chi-square did not indicate a significant difference between orientation course enrollment and degree attainment for the first cohort (students enrolled fall 1999 through spring 2001) of Hispanic students ($p = .153$). No difference was found between Hispanic students taking or not taking the orientation course and successful degree attainment within 2 years of their starting term.

A significant difference was found for the dropout measure ($\chi^2(1) = 5.050; p < .05$). A greater proportion of Hispanic students who enrolled in the orientation course did not fit the “dropout” criteria, and conversely, Hispanic students who did not enroll in the course were more likely to fit the dropout criteria.

Significance was not found for stop-outs ($p = .206$). No difference was found between Hispanic students taking or not taking the orientation course and reenrolling after brief enrollment breaks.

Significant differences were not found for persistence ($p = .563$). No difference was found between Hispanic students taking or not taking the orientation course and persisting across time.

In a similar manner to the above analyses, Pearson chi-square analyses were used to determine if significant course enrollment/retention differences and linear relationships existed for the second cohort (students enrolled fall 2000 through spring 2002). Although an additional significant difference was found for persistence ($\chi^2(1) = 14.016; p < .001$), all other results were similar to cohort one.

The results for cohort three (students enrolled fall 1998 through spring 2002) were dissimilar to cohorts one and two. A significant difference was found for success ($\chi^2(1) = 31.899; p < .001$), dropout ($\chi^2(1) = 44.042; p < .001$), and persistence ($\chi^2(1) = 46.795; p < .001$). A greater proportion of Hispanic students who enrolled in the orientation course did not fit the “dropout” criteria, and conversely, Hispanic students who did not enroll in the course were more likely to fit the dropout criteria. (Refer to Table 1 for a complete listing of results for all cohorts).

TABLE 1

Pearson chi-square values for Hispanic orientation course enrollment and cohorts by retention measures.

Measure	Cohort	N	Chi-square	<i>p</i>
Success	1	48	17.966	.153
	2	41	24.110	.053
	3	456	57.321	.001
Dropout	1	48	14.271	.025
	2	41	40.151	.029
	3	456	56.185	.001
Stop-out	1	48	.059	.206
	2	41	.168	.347
	3	456	4.179	.244
Persistence	1	48	19.024	.563
	2	41	60.260	.001
	3	456	61.468	.001

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the differences between orientation course enrollment and Hispanic student retention regarding four previously mentioned retention measures. Differences were found to exist between orientation course enrollment and retention of Hispanic students, particularly with respect to dropout for the first and second cohorts, and with respect to success, dropout, and persistence for the third cohort.

The results for cohort one are surprising because significance was found for the dropout criteria, meaning that more students who enrolled in the orientation course did not fit the dropout criteria and remained enrolled at the institution; insignificant results were found for persistence. In addition, cohort two is dissimilar from cohort one in that it follows more intuitive logic, meaning that significance was found for both the dropout criteria and the persistence criteria. This may indicate that more students who enrolled in

the orientation course did not drop out and persisted across time.

Not surprising was the consistency of nonsignificant results for the stop-out criteria across all three cohorts, since the dropout criteria were significantly different across all groups. If greater proportions of students are remaining enrolled within the institution, then fewer of them have a chance to stop out; this also means that those students who do drop out do not reenroll until after three or more semesters of nonenrollment.

Aside from the stop-out criteria, cohort three differed from both cohorts one and two regarding significant difference for degree completion, retention, and persistence. Cohorts one and two tracked students who first enrolled within a specific semester, fall 1998 and fall 1999, respectively; cohort three was more concerned with the retention measures of Hispanic students who entered the institution between the fall of 1998 and spring 2002. Thus, instead of examining Hispanic student degree completion, retention, stop-out status, and persistence within a traditional matriculation period, these variables were examined over five years. Significant differences for degree completion, retention, and persistence were not surprising for the third cohort because, intuitively, measured over a longer period of time, student degree completion, retention, and persistence could naturally increase. This might be because certain issues (working part-time, familial responsibilities, remediation, etc.) may require students to engage in their course work at a slower pace than the traditional two-year time frame. This raises a vital question for Hispanic students within community colleges, as well as perhaps for other community college students. Is the traditional two-year matriculation time period adequate for measuring students' success within today's community colleges?

Examination of cohort three is more concerned with overall success, retention, stop-out, and persistence, and less concerned with measuring the traditional enrollment-graduation rates. This finding supports the current literature in that Hispanic students take longer to complete degrees than their counterparts (Valladares, 2003; Martinez, 1998). However, Hispanic students specifically have a poor graduation rate compared to other groups of students (Valladares, 2003; Martinez, 1998), and accordingly, the above argument that extended enrollment could equate to increased degree completion, retention, and persistence may only apply to students at this institution, within this study. Thus, although it was found that extended enrollment did equate to increased degree completion, retention, and persistence for students within this study, these findings contradict literature concerning Hispanic student matriculation and should be generalized with caution.

In addition to success, dropout and persistence were also significantly different for cohort three. While chance factors and an increase in the number of participants could have caused these differences, another variable—student involvement—could also account for their significant difference (Astin, 1984, 1997; Derby and Smith, 2004). Student involvement theory postulates that as students increase their investment of physical and emotional energy on their college campus, their rate of retention increases.

The orientation course in this study was structured to allow students to learn about college processes, systems, offices, and departments; meet with college faculty and administrators; and interact with other students. Each student receives one-on-one

faculty attention about the development of their academic plan, as well as in crafting career and personal goals. This contact allows students the opportunity to set personal and academic goals and assists them in developing an action plan for achieving those goals. All these factors might have contributed to the enrolled minority students feeling welcome and less isolated from institutional processes, structures, faculty, and personnel, which would also increase these students' socialization and acculturation to campus.

Participation in this course may allow Hispanic students to understand the campus better and, in this way, help them to make the necessary physical and emotional connections to campus life, which increase students' socialization and acculturation as an integral part of the institution. Such an experience hits at the heart of Tinto's (1993) conceptual framework of student attrition, in which students' positive experiences, coupled with their intentions, commitments, and campus integration, to effect their decisions to continue at the college or university.

Another issue addressed by this course was providing faculty role models. Faculty involvement in retention initiatives and faculty interaction with students are paramount to student retention (Evangelauf, 1990; Parker, 1997, 1999; Roach, 1999; Tinto, 1989), especially minority student retention (Brotherton, 2001; Chenoweth, 1999; Finley, 2002; Magner, 1989; Parker, 1997, 1999; "University of Kansas," 2001; Watson, 1998). Minority students especially need effective role models within the institution, who can provide guidance and navigational support (Perdomo, 2003; Valladares, 2003).

As discussed in Derby and Smith (2004), the use of GPA when developing retention measures is debatable and, as a result, could confound this study. Evangelauf (1990) cited Tinto as believing that it is best not to use GPA when designating student dropouts because of its quantitative shortfalls. A universal profile of dropout students is nonexistent (Snell & Makeis, 1993); retention research is needed to further clarify the use of GPA and other factors in developing retention measures and definitions (Snell & Makeis, 1993; Wyman, 1997).

Caution should be observed with this study regarding the inference of causal relationships between orientation course enrollment and minority student retention. Although associative relationships exist between orientation course enrollment and the student retention measures for Hispanic students, causal relations should not be inferred because random assignment of students to the orientation course was not possible. In addition, the chi-square statistic tests a "goodness of fit" relationship; thus, cause and effect relationship assignments should be avoided. Experimental research regarding minority student retention within community colleges could assist in further delineating the issues and findings presented herein. For example, future studies could incorporate control groups to better isolate and investigate which treatments (student goal setting, involvement with faculty, peer interactions, etc.) affect the retention measures above and over the others.

Recommendations

Unlike the orientation course presented in this study, many retention programs and

initiatives focus on academic remediation (Congos & Schoeps, 1997; Finley, 2002; Parker, 1999; Roach, 1999; Snell & Makeis, 1993), instead of addressing other issues faced by minority students. Although remediation programs and services are needed at the community college level, also needed are programs and services that assist Hispanic students' physical and emotional investment on campus.

The need for orientation courses of this kind at the community college level is paramount for minority students. Astin (1971; 1975; 1978) addressed the increase in minority student enrollments and urged the development of programs that could bolster minority retention, success, and survival through the reduction of minority retention barriers. Astin's research continues to be pertinent today in light of the struggle of Hispanic students to remain enrolled within the community college sector. Community college institutions must play a role in individual problem solving (Ross, 1991) and investigate solutions to reduce retention barriers for minority students (Parker, 1997, 1999).

Ross (1991) noted that faculty should spend time reflecting on prejudices that may hinder minority student matriculation. While her assertion is valid, it is equally important that administrative personnel, especially those whose positions specifically dictate that they work directly with students, reflect and uncover hidden biases that contribute to the unsuccessful matriculation of minority students.

Research regarding minority student retention is needed at the community college level. Because this study was conducted in a predominately white community college, future research could also study the effects of orientation courses within an urban institution with a predominately nonwhite student body. By conducting future research in this way, researchers may obtain a more accurate, holistic picture of minority retention and orientation course differences within the community college sector.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the retention of Hispanic students within the community college sector. Although mixed results were found for cohorts one and two, significant differences were found for Hispanic student success, retention, and persistence within cohort three (students enrolled fall 1998 through spring 2002).

Enrollment in an orientation course could assist in deterring Hispanic students from dropping out and help students persist beyond the traditional time frame to potentially earn a transferable degree. No relationship existed for Hispanic students regarding stopping out. There could be many reasons why Hispanic students chose not to reenroll after a one-, two-, or three-semester enrollment break. Potential reasons for non-stop-outs include, but are not limited to, financial distress, feeling unwelcome or isolated, transferring to another institution, or modifying career or personal goals.

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