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FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE A STUDENT'S DECISION TO STAY IN COLLEGE

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The focus of this research study is to analyze the factors that influence a) a student's decision to attend a Midwestern higher education institution and b) the student's sense of comfort and belonging with the institution. The research problem was conceptualized using Tinto's (1975) model on student retention in higher education institutions mainly as groundwork for the analysis. Tinto's model indicated that the extent to which a student is integrated with both the social and academic systems of the institution provides implications for the student's decision to stay in or leave the college. The theoretical model used in this study extends Tinto's model to include the "cultural system." The researchers are convinced that the experiences fostered by the institution to allow or facilitate a student's continuing exposure to traditional cultural experiences would have significant bearing on the student's decision to remain with or leave the institution. The different systems are defined as follows:

social - refers to experiences and activities available to students that would assist them in "learning the ropes" upon joining the institution. These experiences and activities could include developing working relationships and interactions outside of the classroom with peers, faculty, and staff. The social experiences could also result in the development of skills and knowledge needed to cope with institutional academic requirements.

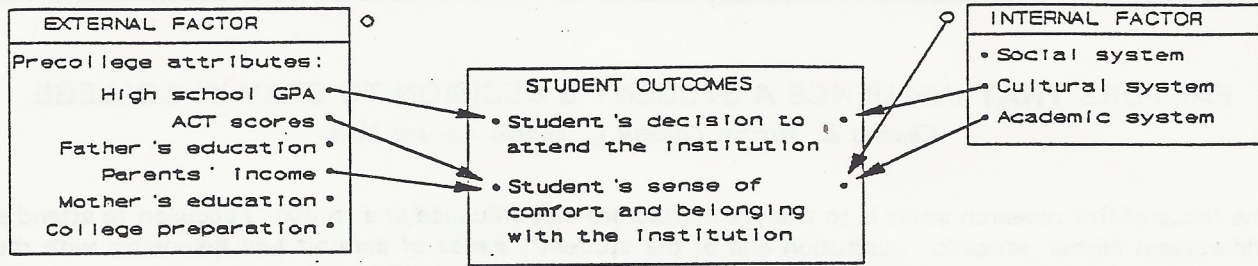
cultural - characterized by institutional assistance in maintaining the beliefs, norms and values -- e.g., religion and other cultural traits -- which the student possesses before his/her admission to the institution.

academic - refers to the institutional experiences and services available to students to assist them in making decisions about courses and programs appropriate to their interests and which keep them on track towards obtaining a degree. Such services and experiences could include but are not limited to academic advising, counseling and in-classroom interaction with peers and faculty.

A two-stage method of analysis was used in this study. The first stage involved a confirmatory factor analysis of data items listed under the "internal factor." This analysis was conducted to determine the clustering of items in relation to the theory established for the three systems. The second stage of analysis involved two steps. The first step grouped factors derived in stage 1 according to the three systems -- social, cultural and academic -- using the literature on student retention and judgement calls by the researchers. With factors grouped into three systems, the second step involved a multiple regression analysis taking the three systems and the external variables as independent variables and the items under student outcomes as dependent variables.

Five hundred ninety-seven students responded to the survey. The respondents were asked to what extent they "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," or "strongly agree" about the importance of the university's institutional climate as related to their sense of comfort and belonging with the institution and their decision to stay with or leave the institution. The great majority of respondents were white (non-Hispanic, 87%), 8% were African American, 2% were Hispanic and another 2% were Asian or American Indian.

Two factors, one external and one internal to the institution influence student outcomes, viz, a student's decision to attend or remain with the institution, and his or her feelings of sense of comfort and belonging with the institution. The external factor includes selected student attributes prior to entry in college, such as: high school academic achievements, college preparation, parents' education background and income status. Three systems within the institution: social, cultural and academic constitute the internal factor. Both external and internal factors are analyzed independently and simultaneously in determining the extent of their influence on student outcomes. (See diagram)



RESULTS

The confirmatory factor analysis resulted in eight factors which were grouped under three systems as indicated in the following:

The cultural system is comprised of cultural diversity among faculty, staff and students, in the curriculum and by residence hall assignments; racial student participation in school organizations; sensitivity of security and judicial systems to race; and religion. The academic system is comprised of academic support to students and financial aid. The social system is comprised of student life programs and athletics.

The multiple regression analysis indicated the following:

- The *student's high school GPA* is the only variable among the external variables that significantly, but negatively, correlated with the student's intention to attend the same institution if he/she could start over again. The regression coefficient is negative, which indicates that the higher a student's high school GPA, the less likely he/she would attend the institution if he/she is given the opportunity to start over again. Other precollege attributes were also negatively correlated although not significant.
- Only the *cultural-related experiences* available to students, among other types of experiences – academic and social – significantly predict the student's decision to remain with the institution.
- Students perceived that their decision to remain with or attend the same institution would be significantly impacted by 1) the presence of faculty, staff and students with

whom the student can identify; 2) the offering of ethnic or minority studies program; 3) the sensitivity (or lack of it) of the security and judicial systems of the university to student's race; 4) opportunities for students of all races/nationalities to participate in university organizations; and 5) the promotion of cultural diversity in the institution.

- considering the internal factor alone, the *academic support* that the institution provides – financial aid, academic advising, opportunities for frequent contact with faculty and other students, placement services, job/career services and availability of residence hall or apartments to students – influenced student sense of belonging and comfort with the institution.
- When both factors (internal and external) were entered in the model, the results indicate that the student's sense of belonging with the institution is not only correlated to the extent that he/she is academically, culturally and socially integrated with the institution, but is also influenced by the income of the student's parents and the student's ACT score.
- Students whose parents earned enough to support their education, are more likely to feel a sense of security or comfort with the institution.
- Students with higher ACT scores are also more likely to feel that they belong.

Reports, studies and climate assessment surveys prepared by the project staff are available on a fee basis.

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