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## ANNOTATION

**Nicoletti FSC, August. "A Study of Pre-Entry Characteristics as Predictors of Retention at a Small Catholic Liberal Arts University." Ed.D. dissertation, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, 2004. 96 pp.**

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The introduction of the study indicates "institutions of higher education face many challenges in today's social and economic climate ... including retention of students and the work associated with maintaining acceptable persistent rates" and universities are investing "financial and personal resources in creating offices that address retention" (1). Retention research started with the work of G. S. Spady in 1970 and continued with the research of V. Tinto in 1975 both of whom "recognized the value in studying retention trends in an effort to maintain acceptable rates" (1).

The purpose of the study "was to determine the extent to which selected pre-entry characteristics could be used as predictors of full-time first-year student persistence through to the following fall semester at a small residential Catholic liberal arts university located in the Midwest" (6). The pre-entry characteristics included "family background [socioeconomic status, parents' educational attainment, and parental expectations], high school educational preparation and experiences [record of academic achievement], and individual attributions [gender]" (6). Three assumptions were made for the purpose of this study. They were first, "the reported American College Testing scores are accurate," second, "all university student records utilized in this study were accurate," and third, "the variables selected for this study are appropriate and relate to the issue of persistence" (9).

The significance of the study was that retention and low completion rates are a challenge for universities. These statistics "impact institutions of higher education as to why students are not persisting through to graduation" and many universities have a commitment "to provide an academic and social environment that engages the student to succeed, persist, and attain a college degree" (9). The study consisted of six different research questions each focusing on whether or not full time first year students persist through to the following fall semester. The questions focused on if there was a significant relationship between persistence and 1) ACT test scores 2) high school GPA, 3) mother's level of education, 4) ethnicity, 5) financial aid, and 6) gender (15).

The researcher defined fifteen different terms so the reader had a common understanding (16). Various limitations such as but not limited to: focusing only on full-time undergraduate students enrolled in four specific years, criterion variables (persistence through to the fall semester), independent variables (ACT test scores, high school GPA, mother's education level, ethnicity,

financial aid, and gender), and that the results were limited to “the subject of the study, a small residential Catholic liberal arts university located in the Midwest” were identified (17).

The theoretical models of student persistence were “Tinto’s Model of Student Departure” which was based on Spady’s work and known as the “interactionist theory of student departure” (18) and “Models of Student College Choice” based on Chapman’s 1980’s research (22). Various student pre-entry characteristics such as high school GPA (26), ACT assessment (28), Gender (29), Financial aid (30), and Ethnicity (32) were referenced and connected back to the literature.

The sample of the study “consisted of full time first-year undergraduate students who matriculated in the fall of 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002. The cohorts were “divided into four groups ... with a “total of 100 randomly selected students selected from a total of 894 students” (37). The research design consisted to dependent and independent variables with three being ordinal scaled (ACT scores, high school GPA, and mother’s level of education) and three nominal scaled variables (ethnicity, financial aid awarded, and gender). Data was collected through the “universities Provost Office and the Office of University Research” with permission (37). A “frequency distribution was conducted to study variables classified as student pre-entry characteristics” and an “enrollment cross-tabulations was conducted to identify the relationship between the variables of persistence and non-persistence” (38).

Data was collected through procedures within the Office of Institutional Research such as Strategic Query language (SQL) and Crystal Reports which were computer lists that contained demographic information and lists of each variable (39). A Mann-Whitney U test was “used to analyze the ranked data,” a Chi-Square test was conducted, and SPSS 11.6 was used to analyze the other variables (40).

It was noted that there was no mortality threat to internal validity, but there was a possibility of “location threat, instrument decay, and collector bias” by way of how the data was collected (42). The researcher acknowledged reliability was a threat to the study as they “relied on the good faith that records and documents procured for this project had been accurately reported” (44). Ethical considerations such as possible harm to the students and confidentiality were addressed (46).

“To report the difference between those students who persisted and those students who did not persist, descriptive and inferential statistics were used” (48). The descriptive statistical procedures were “conducted by creating frequency distributions and bar graphs for ACT scores, high school GPA, and mother’s education level.” Cross-tabulations were conducted on ethnicity, financial aid, and gender with a .05 detecting significance between the two groups based on Chi Square test and Mann-Whitney U test (49).

The results found four of the six “pre-entry characteristics had a significant relationship with persistence” (ACT scores, high school GPA, financial aid, and gender) and two had no significant relationship (ethnicity and mother’s education level) (74). Students with an ACT score of 22.4 or higher persisted as well as those with a 2.90 high school GPA or higher. The study also found “85% of the sample who did not persist did not have financial aid” and it was found “female students were more likely to persist than their male counterparts” (76). Various

recommendations for future study were noted such as replicating the study at other universities, focusing on recruitment initiatives of non-white students, and the use of other methodologies (80). A list of references was shared and cited throughout the study (86).