Predictors of Retention and GPA

A team of six researchers recently scanned the psychological and educational literature to identify the factors that predict two outcomes of postsecondary education, retention and cumulative GPA. They used the method known as meta-analysis on 109 studies to estimate the overall effect of nine factors on retention and cumulative GPA. The nine factors represented the construct of psychosocial and study skill factors (or PSF). The analysis limited its scope to studies of full-time students at four-year institutions within the United States. The findings include the following, among others:

1. “...Most of the PSF variables tested (academic goals, institutional commitment, social support, social involvement, academic self-efficacy, academic-related skills, and two contextual constructs, financial support and institutional selectivity) were found to correlate positively with retention. Academic goals, academic self-efficacy, and academic-related skills were shown to be the strongest predictors of college retention...” [p.274]

2. “...The relationships between PSF variables and GPA, though still mostly positive, are not as strong...the patterns of relationships here are different from those found under the retention criterion. Specifically, achievement motivation was found to be among the strongest predictor [sic] for GPA...” [p.274]

3. “....academic-related skills and institutional commitment...can be valuable predictors of retention, equal to or even better than the other traditional predictors (SES*, high school GPA, and ACT/SAT)...academic goals, social support, social involvement, and academic self-efficacy...also have beta weight estimates that are comparable to those of the traditional variables [SES, high school GPA, and ACT/SAT], suggesting their potential as supplementary predictors for retention.” [p.273]

4. “...although the two traditional predictors, ACT/SAT scores and high school GPA, were consistently the strongest predictors for GPA as normally expected, academic self-efficacy, and, to a lesser extent, achievement motivation appeared to contribute meaningfully to the prediction of this criterion [college GPA]...academic goals and SES appeared to have minimal incremental effects in predicting GPA...” [p.273-4]

5. “...financial support and institutional selectivity are correlated with the retention criterion...financial support was further found to be moderately predictive of the GPA criterion...institutional ability to minimize financial strain may be an important factor whether viewing persistence or performance [GPA]. The remaining contextual influence construct, institutional size, is virtually uncorrelated with retention...Perhaps a modified, more fine-tuned variable reflecting the extent that institutional resources are available to students, such as student-instructor ratio, would be more appropriate here...” [p.275]

This study may help researchers and administrators in higher education to expand their understanding of the structure underlying student retention and performance (as measured by cumulative GPA). Although the study focused on outcomes at four-year institutions, the analysis could still help guide research and program design for two-year institutions.

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*SES is the acronym for “socioeconomic status.”

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