BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ENROLLMENT AND GRADUATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RETENTION PRACTICES FOR NONTRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS ATTENDING FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS

by

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Abstract

This research study is an exploration of retention practices for nontraditional undergraduate students attending faith-based institutions in the United States. The participants in this study are responsible for managing retention at their faith-based institution, and their institution is a member of the Christian Adult Higher Education Association (CAHEA). Each participant’s institutions serve nontraditional undergraduate students with an enrollment of either more than or less than 500 nontraditional students in the United States. The primary research questions were, “What are the effective retention practices utilized to retain nontraditional undergraduate students attending ten faith-based institutions” and “How have the retention practices of ten faith-based institutions impacted the persistence of students who receive their retention services”? The methodology for this study was an exploratory phenomenological methodology, which is used to explore and describe. The research design was an explanatory sequential mixed methods and the specific methods were focused on data collection, data analysis, and mixing the data in this single study. A quantitative non-experiential approach was used to collect data using an online survey questionnaire. A qualitative approach was used to collect data using a conversational interview, which was used to explain and expand the quantitative data collected. The findings in this study revealed that faith-based institutions serving nontraditional students must have effective written retention and completion plans with measurable goals for improving retention. A complete analysis of the findings as well as recommendations is included in this study.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Patrick Sr., Patricia, Patrick Jr., Laura, Terrance, Tate, Timmy, and my Heavenly Father!
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Completing this journey has taken many years and many sacrifices have been made to reach the finish line. There are several people who I want to acknowledge for their prayers and support.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

This study focuses on the problem of nontraditional student retention at faith-based institutions. Retention is defined as “the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission through graduation” (Seidman, 2005b, p.14). When students enroll in college, the desire of the institution is for students to remain enrolled and graduate with their degree. However, while enrollment in higher education continues to increase, there is a gap between enrollment and graduation due to students failing to persist and graduate (Baum, S., Ma, J., & Payea, K., 2013; U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1994; Seidman, 2005b). This problem exists for both traditional residential students and nontraditional adult students (U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES, 2002b). When retention is discussed in research, the terms “attrition” and “persistence” are mentioned too. Seidman (2005b) defined attrition as, “a student who fails to reenroll at an institution in consecutive terms” and persistence as, “the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from beginning through degree completion” (p. 14). In a second five-year follow-up persistence and attainment study for nontraditional students, it was reported that, overall, 43% of nontraditional undergraduates had attained a postsecondary degree of some kind by 1994, compared to 64% traditional undergraduates (U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES, 1994). Out of the cohort students being studied, 23% of nontraditional students remained enrolled, 13% changed
their degree objective, and 33% left without earning a degree. In comparison to traditional students, who were being studied, 20% traditional students remained enrolled, 19% changed their degree objective, and 7% left without earning a degree (U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES, 1994). This data indicates that persistence of nontraditional undergraduate students during their freshmen and sophomore years is a major concern (U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES, 2002b). Unlike the traditional undergraduate student population, many nontraditional undergraduate students enroll in college with needs such as childcare, work related problems, traveling for work, caring for aging parents, and lack of college readiness skills that impact their persistence to graduation (American College Testing (ACT), 2004a; U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES, 2002a; Tinto, 1993; Tomassi, 2008).

Retention of nontraditional students’ needs to be addressed due to increased enrollment of this student population group. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2009) reported, “The actual enrollment for all degree granting institutions increased 34% from 1994 to 2008” (p.20). They project this number will “increase over the next 11 years by 17% reaching 22.4 million students enrolled in higher education” (2009, p.20). (Figure 1) As displayed in figure 2, “NCES (2009), “projects a 28% increase in enrollment among college students 25-34 years old and 22% increase among college students 35 years old and over” (p.20). This data supports the increased enrollment of nontraditional students and may support that enrollment within higher education continues to increase because adult students are aware of the benefits of earning a degree (Baum, S., et al, 2013).
Adult students enter college with the desire to earn a degree to help advance their careers or to fulfill a personal aspiration for pursuing a degree. If an adult student experiences life challenges or they enter college academically underprepared they will become victims of failing to persist and graduate (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kreysa, 2007). NCES (2002b) reported, “Compared with their traditional counterparts, nontraditional
students seeking bachelors and associate degrees are less likely to attain their degree goals within 5 years and more likely to leave postsecondary education” (p. 15). Based on this report, there is a need to better understand how to retain nontraditional undergraduate students (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012).

It is very important for institutions to understand the different barriers nontraditional students faced when attending college. In his speech to the National Association of Colleges and Universities, President David Warren stated, 

Nontraditional students experience multiple barriers to successful and timely degree and credential completion, and most fail in their efforts to overcome them. Many of these students juggle several competing responsibilities, and their main identity is not tied to that of being a college student; it is an aspect of their lives that frequently takes a back seat to other more pressing responsibilities. Many are employed full-time, have dependents, attend part-time and must periodically “stop-out” of college. These factors present substantial roadblocks to completion, and present a challenge for institutions to find ways to help remove these obstacles. In short, serving nontraditional students requires flexibility, support and multiple pathways to help them achieve their education goals. (2011, para 3)

David Warren raises several important questions: first, what are the multiple pathways needed to help nontraditional students achieve their education goals, and second, are institutions equipped to offer this type of assistance, now or even in the future? The overall results of the NCES persistence and attainment study revealed that nontraditional students fail to persist in postsecondary education, and the gap in attrition for nontraditional students occurs within the first to second year (U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES, 1994). There are many studies that focus on the topic of retention, including those offering reasons why students fail to persist. These studies include possible factors that impact student persistence, but most of these studies are related to traditional student retention (Astin, 1985a; Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1985). There are very
few studies that explore effective retention practices, which are needed to assist nontraditional students in persisting to graduation (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012).

**Background, Context, and Conceptual Framework**

The goal of most students who enroll in college is to experience student success. The common factors involving enrollment and attrition for most college students’ are centered on a student’s ability to be successful in college (Greene & Forster, 2003; The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2010) reported, “Nearly 60% of first-year college students, discover that, despite being fully eligible to attend college, they are not ready for postsecondary studies” (p.1). Students who are identified as “not college ready” are referred to as “underprepared”, and if they enroll in college they usually end up withdrawing due to unsuccessful academic progress, lack of peer acceptance, or failure to connect with campus/college life (McCabe 2000; Greene & Forster 2003; Rouche & Rouche 1999; Vandal, 2010). These items are an indication of a retention concern among nontraditional students. For example, does the large percentage of nontraditional undergraduate students’ first-year departure exist because some nontraditional students arrive underprepared, and lack the skills needed to be successful in college? (ACTS, 2004; Bean, 1980, 1981; Greene & Forster, 2003; Rouche & Rouche 1999; Tinto, 1987)

There is a need to identify effective retention practices within higher education (McCabe, 2000). Numerous researches have been done on the topic of retention and models and theories have been created to help institutions understand the factors that prohibit persistence (Astin, 1985a; Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993). However,
research indicates that there are very few institutions in higher education that have retention programs dedicated for nontraditional students (Noel Levitz, 2008). There is limited information on retention studies related to nontraditional students and limited studies related to retention within Christian higher education (Vander Schee, 2008).

Tracking retention and completion rates is a necessary component of managing retention. The University Professional and Continuing Education Association for Research and Consulting and Inside Track conducted a study to measure nontraditional student success (Fong, Jarrett, & Drekmeier, 2012). Seventy-seven institutions participated in the study. This study consisted of 52% public institutions, 29% private non-profit institutions, and 19% were for profit institutions and all were adult-focused institutions. In the summary of the study the following was reported:

- Approximately 43% of responding institutions do not track retention and degree completion rates for nontraditional students.
- Approximately 77% do not know their current degree completion rate for nontraditional students.
- Only 16% have a good understanding of the root causes of attrition for their nontraditional students (Fong, Jarrett, & Drekmeier, 2012).

Participants in this study were asked if they knew their institution’s current retention rate for nontraditional students. While 57% of the participants were aware of this information it is still important to note that 43% of the participants were not aware of this information. The results of this study indicate that additional research on retention of nontraditional students is important and needed (Fong, Jarrett, & Drekmeier, 2012).

The high level problem being examined in the context of this study was retention of nontraditional students. Currently, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data
System (IPEDS) tracks only the graduation rates of first-time, full-time freshmen and does not include specific information for nontraditional students (Dervarics, 2012). Due to the lack of graduation data available in IPEDS for nontraditional undergraduate students, little is known regarding how much the persistence problem has increased. With such a large percentage of participants, in Fong, et al study, who were unaware of their retention and completion rates for nontraditional students, it is apparent that there is a need to increase our knowledge of nontraditional undergraduate student retention (Fong, Jarrett, & Drekmeier, 2012).

**Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework and seminal research for this study includes the topic of adult learning (Knowles, 1962), Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) Model of College Outcomes for Adults, Bean’s model of attrition (1980, 1981), and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model of nontraditional student retention. Tinto’s theory of student departure (1975, 1993) and the factors that influence nontraditional student persistence (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 1999; Rendon, 1994) will be discussed, culminating with highlights from Tinto’s (2006) review on the state of student retention research and practice. The researcher hopes the theories and research discussed in this study will provide a clear picture of how nontraditional (adult) students learn, what factors impact their ability to persist, the different types of learning outcomes experienced by adults, and why it is important to encourage persistence among nontraditional students. Due to the large amount of research related to retention of traditional students, (Astin, 1985a; Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1985) this study focuses on an exploration of retention practices utilized to help nontraditional undergraduate students.
persist to graduation. Therefore, included in this study is Seidman’s (2005b) retention formula for student success as part of the framework.

Adult students are becoming more noticeable in higher education. According to Kasworm (2003), “Adult students in higher education represent a growing population in the shifting terrain of higher education. Most student affairs professionals are concerned with the key goals that motivate adult student attendance, believing them to be key recruitment and retention factors” (p. 3). Basically, she is saying university staff members’ want to know how to recruit and retain nontraditional students. Research indicates that retention is a major concern within higher education; however, due to limited research it is not known how much retention has impacted institutions within Christian higher education (Morris, Beck, & Smith, 2004). This study seeks to explore and understand the phenomenon related to retention practices for undergraduate nontraditional students at faith-based institutions.

**Statement of the Problem**

The topic of retention, student attrition, and persistence are popular terms within higher education, and can be found among the exhausted list of research literature; however, most of the research is focused on retention at public institutions. Research indicates the attrition patterns between traditional students and nontraditional students are very different (Drekmeier, 2010). According to Patricia Franz (2010), “Faith-based colleges and universities, much like their secular counterparts, have been challenged to coordinate not only the mechanisms to encourage persistence, but also assemble the administrators and faculty to execute upon the outlined tactics” (p. 4). With the increase among nontraditional students returning to college (Aslanian & Green-Giles, n.d.; NECS,
2009) institutions can no longer ignore their needs or incorrectly profile this population of students (Aslanian & Green-Giles, n.d.). There is a need for more studies related to retention of nontraditional undergraduate students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Although there is a large amount of literature on the general topic of retention of traditional students (Astin, 1985a; Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1999) more research is needed for retention of undergraduate students attending faith-based institutions, which will fill the gap of literature within Christian higher education (Morris, Beck, & Smith, 2004). Even though there are research studies on retention at faith-based institutions, these studies addressed specific groups such as minorities, athletes (Latham, 2004 & Couch, 2011) and traditional students (Vander Schee, 2008). Still, little is known about effective retention practices used to retain nontraditional undergraduate students at faith-based schools. The problem is a gap in knowledge regarding retention practices used to manage retention within Christian higher education (Vander Schee, 2008).

**Purpose of the Study**

The focus of this study revolves around nontraditional undergraduate student retention. There are very few studies that explore effective retention practices needed to assist nontraditional students with persisting to graduation (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012). Further examination regarding effective retention practices within higher education is needed, specifically on retaining nontraditional students. The primary purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the nontraditional undergraduate student retention practices from the perspective of retention managers at ten faith-based institutions. Research indicates the challenges nontraditional students face while enrolled in school and the reasons they
fail to persist (ACTS, 2004; Astin, 1985b; Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1999). There is a need to understand if the retention practices utilized by the participant’s institution assist in retaining nontraditional undergraduate students and the impact made on the institution’s graduation rate. Furthermore, the outcome of the study may identify effective retention practices that may be helpful to all institutions that serve nontraditional undergraduate students.

**Research Questions**

The primary research questions that guided this study are:

**Primary Research Questions**

1. What are the effective retention practices utilized to retain nontraditional undergraduate students attending ten faith-based institutions?

2. How have the retention practices of ten faith-based institutions impacted the persistence of students who receive their retention services?

The following sub-questions used in the conversational interview were:

1. How do some faith-based institutions describe the first-year experience program offered to retain first-time in college, nontraditional undergraduate students?

2. What academic support initiatives are offered for nontraditional undergraduate students?

3. What retention programs do faith-based institutions offer for nontraditional undergraduate students with insufficient academic preparation?

4. What remedial and/or developmental courses are offered by each institution?

5. How does new student orientation help engage nontraditional undergraduate students?

6. How do ten faith-based institutions describe the relationship, if any, between their Christian faith and retention management?

7. What type of tutorial assistance is provided for nontraditional undergraduate students?
8. How do ten faith-based institutions describe their second-year experience they offer to retain nontraditional undergraduate students entering their second year of college?

**Rationale, Relevance, and Significance**

Managing nontraditional student retention includes tracking graduation rates. During the September 2012 U. S. House of Representatives Subcommittee meeting, it was noted that the current method of collecting graduation rates by the federal government does not include the large number of nontraditional students now in higher education (Dervarics, 2012). Since the documentation of graduation rates is not maintained on a federal level, there is no way to obtain current retention data for the nontraditional students or to determine the depth of the problem. With the projected increase of enrollment of nontraditional students there is a need to understand what effective retention practices are utilized to retain nontraditional students (NCES, 2009).

Research indicates the attrition patterns between traditional students and nontraditional students are very different (Drekmeier, 2010). Since there is little evidence of studies focused on this issue at faith-based institutions this study is needed to explore and identify the effective retention practices used to manage retention at faith-based institutions.

**Rationale for the Study**

Student retention is not a new topic within higher education. In general, retention is a well-known phenomenon that has been observed and studied for many years (Tinto, 2006). According to Seidman, (2006), “Over the years, colleges have spent a lot of money to help improve retention and graduation rates. In spite of all the money spent on