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A Cross-Disciplinary Comparison of Students' Self-Reported Degree Completion Strategies (0231)

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Student retention is an increasingly significant issue in higher education. Retention, usually defined as the number or percentage of entering students that continue in their program of study until graduation (Albert, 2010), represents a reliable revenue source for institutions, and retention rates are also perceived externally as an indicator of institutional effectiveness (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). There is an extensive body of published research, spanning several decades, on factors influencing student retention. However, the outcomes of this research have had relatively little effect on improving retention rates (Tinto, 2007). The effects of factors such as a student's year of study, the type of institution they attend, or the external or social forces currently impacting their education or their personal lives, are rarely consistent on a collective level (Tinto, 2007).

Additionally, many studies of retention focus on students who do not complete their degrees (e.g. Gunderson, D'Silva, & Odo, 2012). While this focus is useful for identifying factors that may put students at risk of non-completion, it ignores factors that help students to complete their programs of study. In other words, this research focuses on student failure rather than on student success. Much of the research on retention also focuses on student retention from first to second year; this is a reasonable approach given that approximately 30% of first-year post-secondary students do not re-enrol for a second year of study (Tizon, 2016). However, looking at factors affecting student retention only from first to second year does not identify factors affecting student retention through to graduation.

The research reported in this paper compares retention-related data self-reported by undergraduate students who had completed their degree within the past year or were nearing degree completion (had accumulated 90 or more credits in a 120-degree program). The analysis compares factors related to undergraduate degree completion as reported by students in five groups of academic disciplines: arts, business, education, sciences, and “other”. Data were collected via an online survey of 528 students nearing graduation and 162 recently graduated students at three Canadian universities. Qualitative questions on the survey asked students to assess how well their secondary education prepared them for higher education; to identify the factors that contributed to their persistence to graduation; to identify campus resources that they felt supported them in their degree completion; and for the advice they would give to students starting the programs they were now graduating from. Responses were classified into the five above-named disciplinary groups, themes within the responses from each group were identified and counted, and the frequencies of mentions of similar themes were then compared across groups.

35% of respondents were in sciences-related programs; 31% of respondents were in arts-related programs; 20% were in business-related programs; 7% were in education-related programs; and the remainder were classified into the “other” category. In the responses to the question about the adequacy of secondary education as preparation for higher education, the most frequently occurring response in all five groups was that secondary education did not provide adequate preparation for students to understand or meet the academic standards expected in higher education.

Students across all five groups cited personal factors (e.g. own motivation and work ethic) and external support (e.g. family and friends) as the largest contributors to their persistence

to graduation. However, a striking finding from this analysis was that business students mentioned support from professors as contributing to their persistence far less frequently than students in the other four groups. Along similar lines, business students mentioned being involved in student advocacy groups far less often than did students in arts or sciences programs.

Students in all five groups mentioned more academic support or advice and more availability of campus facilities as the two major resources that would have helped them more in their degree completion. When asked for advice that they would give beginning students, “study hard”, “be organized”, “make friends”, and “work hard” were the most commonly occurring advice from students in all five groups; however, business students mentioned “talk to your professors” less frequently than students in other programs.

This research makes several significant contributions to our understanding of student retention and degree completion. First, the results echo the results of previous research in highlighting the importance of individual factors such as program of study and personal situations in understanding reasons for student retention and degree completion. Second, the study uses data from students who have graduated or who are near graduation, rather than data from students who have failed to complete their programs. While we acknowledge the value of research identifying why students leave higher education, we believe that it is equally important to examine the factors that students identify as contributing to their persistence to completion. Third, the study compares data from students across different academic disciplines. This approach allows the identification of factors that may be more significant in influencing retention, persistence and degree completion rates in particular academic disciplines. For example, the lower engagement with professors reported by business students, in comparison to students in other disciplines, suggests that business programs wishing to improve student

retention rates may want to examine the quality of teaching or the types of support that faculty members offer for students in these programs.

The outcomes of this research will be useful not only to researchers examining student retention in general, but also to administrators, staff and faculty in specific academic disciplines in deciding where to focus their efforts and resources so as to best support student success.

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