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## Students' Voices on the Retention Factors in Korean Local University

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### Abstract

This research found four key factors affecting students' school life. Within relational factor, students were satisfied with their campus life by building and expanding the network. Within educational factor, students who developed positive relationship with faculty members had more academic achievement motivation. However, students who had negative relationship with their faculty members tended to be less satisfied with their school. Within psychological factor, low psychological wellbeing caused by their college choice and aptitude led to dissatisfaction with campus life. External environments factor, students who commuted to school or faced financial difficulties were less likely to stay in school. However, students are more likely to remain in their school by recognizing social expectations of people in Korean society. This knowledge can be helpful as a reference for educators and college administrators who are willing to develop successful retention program.

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*Keywords:* Retention, student voice, local university

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### 1. Introduction

As of 2012, Korea has 189 4-year universities, and the number of universities in Seoul and the Seoul Metropolitan Area has declined to 117 from 122 in 2002. On the other hand, the number of students in the area has increased by 88,000, indicating the number of students admitted to the area is steadily increasing (Korean Council for University Education, 2012). In addition, a report indicated that university locating in local areas showed higher dropout rates (4.7%) than those in Seoul and the Seoul Metropolitan Area (Seoul 2.5% and Gyeonggi & Incheon

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3.0%). This phenomenon is difficult to improve unless local universities make special efforts to attract and retain students. In higher education, student retention has a significant impact on stability of university budget (Tinto, 2005). Research to date has studied student dropout by exploring various quantitative aspects of student dropout (Kim, 2008; Lim & Kwak, 2011). However, few qualitative studies have been conducted to understand the reasons for which students in local universities are tempted to drop out or their experiences that lead them to stay in school. Accordingly, the present study attempts to listen to voices of students in a local university and understand their experiences in depth. In particular, it aims to explore the effects of students' satisfaction with college life on their retention in the universities.

## **2. Background**

What are the factors that influence college students' decisions to drop out? There must be many aspects. First, in terms of academic aspects, students' academic performance has a significant influence on the decision to drop out. Previous studies have already shown that GPA of dropouts were lower than those of graduates (Caison, 2005). Secondly, in terms of social aspects, various social experiences (campus activities, faculty-student interactions, experiences with peer groups, etc.) affect students in maintaining successful college life (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Thirdly, in terms of personal aspects, college students' psychological problems continue to be on the rise (Kitzrow, 2003). Mental stress adversely affects students' college life and interferes with their academic performance (Stallman, 2010). Consequently, low academic achievement due to stress affects students' determination to stay in college, presenting high likelihood of dropout (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009). Lastly, in terms of external environmental aspects, financial issues are an important determinant of sound college life. Economic difficulty has a particularly poignant effect on low-income students' decision to drop out of school (Longerbeam, Sdlacek & Alatorre, 2004). A leading theory in college students' intention to stay in school is the Student Integration Model by Tinto (1975). Students come to school with a variety of characteristics such as family backgrounds, individual attributes, and precollege schooling experiences. These characteristics affect not only the sense of purpose that students have initially when they come to school but sometimes also their achievement of educational goals. Tinto (1975) argued that academic and social integration is an important indicator to help understanding students' intention to stay in school. According to Tinto, a high level of academic and social integration has a positive influence on students to continue with school. Tierney (2000) suggested a model based on a cultural standpoint. With an emphasis on how culture influences students' deviation, he developed a theoretical framework on urban low-income students such as African Americans and Hispanics. In particular, he paid attention to individual identity and cultural background to improve students' academic performance. In addition, Braxton & Hirschy (2005) proposed a new student deviation theory based on non-residential institutions. Students who commute long-distance do not stay in school for long hours, and consequently, social integration was not as important as academic integration. Important components in this theory are students' entry characteristics, internal and external environments, and academic integration. Each component affects students' immersion to the institution and school-life persistence. Encouragement and support from close ones influence students' intention to stay in school (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Accordingly, the component of external environments becomes important to understand students commuting long distance, and becomes an important indicator in understanding their decision to stay in school.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1. Participants*

Study participants were 25 college students (15 male and 10 female) attending a national university in a small city. In terms of school year and major, they consisted of 4 freshmen, 10 sophomores, 8 juniors, and 3 seniors, and came from a variety of departments: 8 in computer science, 4 in folklore, 5 in international trade, and 4 in educational technology.

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