Factors influencing the institutional commitment of online students

Hall P. Beck [a,*], Meg Milligan [b]

[a] Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, United States
[b] Troy University, Montgomery, AL 36103, United States

ABSTRACT

The positive effects of institutional commitment (IC) on student persistence and success have long been recognized in campus face to face programs, but there is little commensurate research focused on students in online programs. The objectives of this investigation are to: (a) determine if a combination of demographic, family background, reasons for attending, and student experience variables reliably predicts the IC of online students, (b) assess the relative contributions of the predictors, and (c) provide information to counselors, advisors, and policy makers enabling them to augment the commitment of their students. A sample of 831 online students at a southeastern university responded to the College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ). Results indicated the CPQ reliably predicted IC scores, accounting for 35% of the variance. An important finding was that variables available at or prior to matriculation were of limited utility in predicting IC. Instead, IC was primarily determined by students' interactions with the schools' academic and social environments. Implications for enhancing student commitment are discussed.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The degree of commitment members feel towards their group has long been recognized as a critical determinant of the success and stability of business, military, and academic organizations (Gade, 2003; reviews by Mathieu & Zajac, 1990 and Meyer & Allen, 1997; McMullan & Gilmore, 2008; Peterson, 2004). Understanding the role of the specific variables impacting institutional commitment (IC) is particularly important for colleges and universities. Students with strong feelings of loyalty and satisfaction obtain higher grades, better test scores, and have lower attrition rates than less committed students (Hixenbaugh, Dewart, & Towell, 2012; Nora & Cabrera, 1993; Oja, 2011; Robbins et al., 2004; Woosley & Miller, 2008).

Whereas many studies (for reviews see Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Robbins et al., 2004) have shown that IC is related to student persistence and success, most of this research was conducted at brick-and-mortar schools. While there is some support for the supposition that components of IC also influence online students (e.g., Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2013; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003), there remains a paucity of information regarding the role of commitment among students enrolled in distance education programs. This gap in the literature is particularly problematic as many online programs suffer from high attrition rates (Levy, 2007; Rossett & Schafer, 2003; Sitzmann & Ely, 2011; Welsh, Wanberg, Brown, & Simmering, 2003).

Although most studies were correlational, the data are consistent with the premise that enhancing IC will augment the persistence and performance of online students. In order to increase IC, it is first necessary to institute a system that will efficiently measure significant components of IC and identify online students with relatively little commitment to their programs. Correlates of IC manifest themselves at different points in the student's academic career. Some student attributes (e.g., ethnicity, age) are known or could easily be determined at or prior to matriculation. A common strategy is to provide special programs or give additional attention to members of groups characterized by high dropout rates and/or little institutional commitment.

Following matriculation, the commitment of online students is likely to change as they gain experience with the institution's academic and social environments. A literature review by Davidson, Beck, and Milligan (2009) identified nine prominent "student experience" themes that were statistically related to retention and/or IC. These were academic and social integration (e.g., for review, see Metz, 2004–2005; Tinto, 1975, 1993), financial strain (e.g., Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Fike & Fike, 2008; Somers, 1995; Tyson, 2011), degree commitment (e.g., Brown, 2012), scholastic conscientiousness (e.g., Sitzmann, 2012; Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000), collegiate stress (e.g., Aldwin, 2007; Bean & Eaton, 2000, 2001, 2002; Davidson & Beck, 2006a, 2006b; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Maddi, Matthews, Kelly, Villarreal, & White, 2011), motivation to learn (e.g., Hart, 2012; Kitsantas, Winsler, & Huie, 2008; Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1986), effectiveness of advising (e.g., Bean, 1985; Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1988; Lee, 2010), and academic efficacy (e.g., Davidson & Beck, 2006a,b; Sitzmann, 2012).

* Corresponding author at: Psychology Department, P.O. Box 32109, 222 Joyce Lawrence Ln. Boone, NC 28608, United States. Tel.: +1 828 262 2272; fax: +1 828 262 2974.

E-mail address: beckhp@appstate.edu (H.P. Beck).

The objectives of this investigation are to: (a) determine if a combination of demographic, family background, reasons for attending, and student experience variables reliably predicts the IC of online students, (b) assess the relative contributions of the predictors, and (c) provide information to counselors, advisors, and policy makers enabling them to augment the commitment of their students.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The respondents were 839 students primarily or entirely enrolled in online courses at a southeastern university during the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 academic years. Requests for participants were mass emailed to faculty; extra credit was suggested in the correspondence. Although ethical and academic freedom concerns prevented the identification of individual classes, many professors voluntarily reported that the majority of their students elected to participate.

Sixty-five per cent of the sample was female. Fifty-three per cent of the students were Caucasian; 37% Black; and 5% Hispanic. Five per cent reported that they were "Asian," "Native American," or of "Other" ethnicity. Sixteen per cent were freshman; the remaining 84% were sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Forty-five per cent of the mothers and 42% of the fathers of the students attended college (Table 1). Ages ranged from 18.82 to 60.87 years (M = 33.18; SD = 8.42). All participants were treated in accord with the American Psychological Association Guidelines for Ethical Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002), and approval to conduct the study was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board.

2.2. The instrument

The College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ) was selected for the present study because the instrument is not excessively long and provides a broad array of variables that have been empirically associated with IC and/or students' persistence decisions. The main two components of the CPQ are the Student Background and Student Experience Forms.

The Student Background Form is composed of indicators that could be obtained at or prior to matriculation. This investigation employed two types of questions from the Student Background Form. These were Demographic and Family items (age, female, ethnicity [Black, Hispanic, Caucasian, other ethnicity], mother attended college, father attended college, freshman) and Reasons for Attending items (friends attend, quality of academic programs, and reputation of the school).

As the name implies, the Student Experience Form was designed to assess students' reactions to the school or program's academic and social environments. A series of factor analytic studies (Beck, Milligan, Lindheimer, & Osborn, 2012; Davidson & Beck, 2010; Davidson et al., 2009) involving more than 8000 students yielded 54 close-ended Student Experience items. The Student Experience items fell into ten distinct, homogeneous clusters or scales (see Appendix A).

The scales and their main components are (key components/ number of items/representative item): *Institutional Commitment* (loyalty, intention to reenroll, confidence in school choice/4/"How confident are you that this is the right college or university for you?"), *Degree Commitment* (the personal importance and value that students and their supportive network place on degree completion; sense of certainty in degree attainment/6/"At this moment in time, how strong would you say your commitment is to earning a college degree, here or elsewhere?"), *Academic Integration* (positive views of instruction, instructors, and own intellectual growth; awareness of connections between academics and careers/7/"In general, how satisfied are you with the quality of instruction you are receiving here?"), *Social Integration* (sense of belonging, shared values, and similarity to others; positive involvement behaviors/6/"How much do you think you have in common with other students here?"), *Collegiate Stress* (feelings of distress, pressure, and sacrifice/4/"How often do you feel overwhelmed by the academic workload here?"), *Financial Strain* (financial worries and difficulties; sense of disadvantage relative to others/4/"How often do you worry about having enough money to meet your needs?"), *Motivation to Learn* (interest and enjoyment in academic tasks; willingness to spend extra time/8/"Some courses seem to take a lot more time than others. How much extra time are you willing to devote to your studies in those courses?"), *Scholastic Conscientiousness* (timely performance of academic responsibilities/4/"How often do you turn in assignments past the due date?"), *Academic Efficacy* (confidence in academic skills and outcomes/5/"How much doubt do you have about being able to make the grades you want?"), and *Advising Effectiveness* (positive views of advising and school communication processes/4/"How satisfied are you with the academic advising you receive here?").

Student Experience items were answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale. A sixth option, *not applicable*, was included because certain items did not pertain to some students. Verbal labels for the response scales varied according to the wording of the questions (i.e., if a question asked "how often" a student engaged in a behavior, the response scale ranged from *never* to *very often*. If the question asked "how much" students liked an aspect of the college environment, the end pegs were *very much* and *very little*). All answers were converted to 5-point "favorability" scores (−2 to +2), based on whether the response indicated something positive or negative about the student's college experience. In addition to the ten scales, the Student Experience Form contained a single dichotomous "Intent to Graduate" item asking if the student's goal was to obtain a baccalaureate degree at this institution.

2.3. Procedure

Before taking the questionnaire, students were told that the purpose of the investigation was to discover their views about many aspects of their lives at college. They were informed that all answers would be kept confidential. Participants responded to the Student Background and Student Experience Forms of the CPQ online at their convenience. Most students completed the questionnaire in less than 35 min. At the conclusion of the session, a screen appeared on a computer monitor thanking them for their participation.

3. Results

With the exception of age, which was a continuous variable, all Demographic and Family Background measures (female, mother attended college, father attended college, freshman, ethnicity [Black, Hispanic, other ethnicity]) were treated as categorical indices. The Caucasian group functioned as a reference for the other three ethnic groups. The Reasons for Attending items (friends attend, quality of academic

Table 1
Sample distribution by sex, ethnicity, class and parental education.

	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
Sex			*Class*		
Female	538	64.7	Freshman	130	15.6
Male	293	35.3	Not freshman	701	84.4
Ethnicity			*Attended college*		
Black	306	36.8	Mother attended	374	45
Caucasian	443	53.3	Mother did not attend	457	55
Hispanic	40	4.8	Father attended	348	41.9
Other	42	5.1	Father did not attend	483	58.1

Note. N = 831. Variable names are in boldface.