



Predictors of first year retention rates at the university of the West Indies, Jamaica



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ABSTRACT

This study examines first year retention rates of First degree entrants in the academic year 2014-15. Level of academic preparation was operationalized as pass/failure on the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) and matriculation status (normal/lower entry). Variables that were strong predictors of retention were scholarship status and matriculation status. Residential status proved to be statistically significant, while sex, total courses passed in high school, and English Language Proficiency status were statistically non-significant. Future studies need to examine retention of non-traditional students and predictor variables reflective of attribution theory and locus of control.

1. Introduction

Within the English speaking Caribbean, studies of higher education have examined policies related to financing (Bennett, 2005; Davies, 2005; Henry-Wilson, 2005; James and Williams, 2005; Shaw, 2005), access (Grant-Woodham, 2007; Hamilton and Severin, 2005), human resource development (Dallas and Virgo, 2015; Lewis, 2005), accreditation (Roberts, 2007; Perkins, 2015) and quality assurance (Edwards-Henry, 2015; Gift, 2015; Leo-Rhynie, 2005). While all of these policy areas serve to influence, and are influenced by, institutional practices at higher education institutions, the study of student retention is developing into a corpus of knowledge within the Caribbean landscape.

Student retention largely concerns the trajectory of students in higher education with an emphasis on those who persist or do not persist in their studies until completion or graduation (Tinto and Cullen, 1973; Tinto, 1975). When students interrupt their studies to take a leave of absence, or to voluntarily withdraw, or are required to withdraw for poor academic performance, the interruption can result in longer times to graduate, foregone tuition, and lack of qualifications for the students. For institutions participating in Title IV federal aid financial programmes in the United States, these institutions are required to report student retention and graduation rates to the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education compiles reports on first year retention rates (i.e., freshmen who return for their sophomore year) as well as on-time and extended graduation rates. Given the importance of student retention as a reporting requirement for federal funding, administrators of public institutions need to be aware of best practices for attracting students and keeping them enrolled to

programme completion. Fortunately, there is a plethora of literature on student retention in the United States that can help administrators to adopt best practices for successful student outcomes.

In the United States, the scholarship on student retention is abundant with theoretical frameworks that have been developed and revised over many decades. Student retention has been theorized under the concepts of student involvement and engagement (Astin, 1999) and social and academic integration (Tinto and Cullen, 1973; Tinto, 1975, 2006). Astin's theory of student involvement emphasizes the importance of student's time as a precious resource and how much time is spent on activities that reflect their level of involvement and engagement in a University setting. Students' involvement and engagement can be gauged by their residential status, participation in clubs and societies, athletic involvement, involvement in student governance, student-faculty interactions, and academic involvement. In a longitudinal study of the effects of student involvement on outcomes (Astin, 1977 as quoted in Astin, 1999), Astin concluded that nearly all forms of student involvement were associated with greater than average changes in entering student characteristics. Involvement was more associated with change than entering freshmen characteristics or institutional characteristics.

Tinto's theory of social and academic integration stems from his ground breaking treatise on student dropout (1973, 1975). Tinto theorized that student dropout was synonymous to Durkheim's theory of suicide. When an individual is not integrated within the larger society and feels a sense of disconnect, this can lead to feelings of indifference or isolation, and hence, suicide. Similarly, to the extent that a student in a university setting is not sufficiently integrated into that setting, he or

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she may withdraw from their studies either voluntarily or from academic failure. Tinto posited that goal commitment was the strongest predictor of student persistence, but so too were intellectual development and the social integration of students. Tinto argued that social integration can serve to influence the degree of cohesion between a student and their environment. He posited that integration through informal peer-group associations, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty and administrative personnel result in varying degrees of social communication, friendship support, and collective affiliation which should presumably increase the likelihood of persistence (Tinto and Cullen, 1973, 59). The academic integration of students, on the other hand, is commonly gauged by grade performance and subjective measures of enthusiasm and value of a university education. Persisters tend to have a greater capacity for abstract reasoning and greater appreciation of the college experience than do non-persisters. In summary, the theory of student involvement and engagement (Astin, 1999) and social and academic integration (Tinto, 1973, 1975; Tinto, 1975) comprise an interplay of cognitive and affective characteristics of students and institutional practices.

Student retention has also been theorized under a host of affective and cognitive characteristics of students largely influenced by psychology (Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). These theories include attribution theory, expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy, and locus of control, among others. Attribution theory describes how individuals interpret events and how their interpretation influences motivation for learning as well as future learning (Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Expectancy-value theory concerns beliefs about specific tasks. These beliefs include ability beliefs, perceived difficulty of task, individual goals and affective memories. Perceptions of prior experiences and social influences also play an important role (Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011) in expectancy-value theory. Self-efficacy beliefs refer to an individual's beliefs concerning whether or not he or she can perform a course of action resulting in a desired outcome (Bandura 1977 as quoted in Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). And lastly, locus of control refers to a person's beliefs about control over life events. Individuals who assume responsibility for outcomes are known as internals, while individuals who project blame on others for outcomes are described as externals (Grimes, 1997; Findley and Cooper, 1983 as quoted in Gifford et al., 2006). These theoretical frameworks can help administrators to comprehend the myriad forces influencing student retention and adopt theoretically-informed practices.

In the Caribbean, student retention and graduation rates are gaining importance as important metrics. In 2016, an agency¹ attached to the Jamaica Ministry of Education requested student retention and graduation rates from tertiary institutions for the 2015-16 academic year. Although this request represents a pilot, it is expected that annual reporting of these indicators will become the norm.

A few studies examining student retention in the Caribbean have been published. One of the early studies (Cheesman et al., 2006) examined a cohort of graduates to identify predictors of student success. The study by Cheesman et al. (2006) concluded that students most likely to receive honours degrees were female, were engaged in full-time study, were commuters, had applied for financial assistance, and had studied in a discipline other than Medical Sciences. In another study of student retention (Warrican et al., 2014), students most likely to be retained (i.e. enrolled/graduated) in distance education were from non-Campus countries, were required to take the English Language Proficiency Test, were increasingly older in age, and had increasingly higher cumulative grade point averages (GPAs). In a more recent study of student retention (Paterson and Stewart, 2016), students most likely to be retained (i.e., enrolled/graduated) were recipients of financial scholarships and female students. The study also uncovered that the number of courses passed in high school and the increasing age

of students were significant predictors of retention. Living on campus, however, was found to reduce one's probability of being retained.

The Caribbean studies above all used a correlational design incorporating regression analyses. The study by Cheesman et al. (2006) incorporated a linear regression model that examined the influence of a number of independent variables on the dependent variable, *class of degree*. Analyses were conducted separately for males and females and then for a combined sample of both sexes. For the combined sample, the percentage of variance explained in the dependent variable was 24%. In the study by Warrican et al. (2014), descriptive statistics and a binary logistic regression model were used to examine a number of independent variables on student academic performance in individual courses, and the graduation status in 2013 of a 2008 cohort. In the binary logistic regression model examining the graduation status of the 2008 cohort, the independent variables accounted for 48% of the variance in the dependent variable. In a recent study by Paterson and Stewart (2016), a binomial logistic regression model was used to examine student retention over a seven-year period to identify predictors of student retention operationalized as enrolled and graduated students. In that study, the independent variables accounted for 5% of the variation in the dependent variable. The results above reflect that student retention is influenced by factors that have yet to be investigated.

The retention literature has identified level of academic preparation as an important predictor of student persistence and success (Astin, 2012; Swail, 2004 as quoted in Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Academically prepared students are those who meet the admission requirements for entry into a programme of study, while academically underprepared students are those who do not meet all the admission criteria but may be granted entry to an institution that has supports in place to improve the students' academic development while enrolled. The Caribbean literature on student retention has not fully explored the level of academic preparation on student retention. Although one study (Warrican et al., 2014) examined students who were required to sit the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) as a predictor of retention, a better measure of academic preparation is students who fail the ELPT and are admitted to a programme of study, albeit somewhat underprepared.

In the Caribbean, entrance examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) are not usually a requirement for admission to higher education institutions, although some disciplines may administer a test that is specific to the discipline of study. At The University of the West Indies in Jamaica, all entrants are expected to have proficiency in Standard English and the ELPT is designed as a placement test to ensure students take the necessary Foundation courses that are commensurate with their English Language proficiency. In the English speaking Caribbean, many Caribbean territories have dual languages comprising Creole and Standard English. This situation has developed from socio-historical circumstances which, on the one hand, has resulted in hierarchical valuing of one language over the other and, on the other hand, has resulted in the perception that both languages are linguistically similar based on the two languages' shared vocabulary (Coard and Dyche, 2013). The second assumption is of particular significance since the curriculum in Caribbean universities may not be structured in a way to reflect the distinctiveness of both languages and the circumstances for their use, and the perception among students that they are proficient in both languages (Coard and Dyche, 2013).

Level of academic preparation, operationalized as pass/failure on the English Language Proficiency Test, is expected to be an important predictor of student retention. A number of studies examining proficiency in Standard English and academic performance uncovered a positive relationship between the two variables. This finding has been found in contexts such as Tanzania (Wilson and Komba, 2012) and Nigeria (Aina et al., 2013).

At The University of the West Indies, Jamaica, students have been described as exhibiting poor oral communication and writing skills

¹ The Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission (JTEC).

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