



## Factors that influence pre-service teachers' persistence

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines factors that predict persistence in major among pre-service teachers.
- Engagement in the campus environment positively predicts persistence.
- Pre-service teachers with higher grades more likely to persist in major.
- Minority and males less likely to persist than White, female counterparts.

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of various factors in pre-service teachers' persistence. Using a sample of U.S. pre-service teachers ( $N = 1365$ ) from 256 institutions, the study explored the joint effect of predictors that influence their persistence including student engagement, demographic characteristics, prior achievement, college grades, and institutional characteristics. Results from multilevel logistic models indicated that campus environment engagement was a weak but positive predictor of persistence, those with higher grades were more likely to persist, and male and minority pre-service teachers were less likely to persist. Implications include implementing evidence-based programs to improve campus environment and support at-risk candidates.

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### 1. Pre-service teacher persistence

The shortage of pre-service teachers and the consequent shortage of teachers, particularly in secondary schools and in subjects like mathematics, science, and special education, have given rise to educational concerns in the United States and internationally (Chevalier & Dolton, 2004, pp. 14–21; Corcoran, 2017a; Corcoran, 2017b; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003; Roberts, 2012; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Data from the U.S. suggests that while teacher demand is growing, teacher supply is shrinking with fewer prospective teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs. Should current trends persist, the U.S. is projected to be short of

over 100,000 teachers by 2018 (Sutcher et al., 2016). Steady declines in first year undergraduate enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) substantiate such projections, with over a 35% decline in enrollment from the 2008–09 to 2013–14 school year.

In addition to the decline in enrollment, persistence in the education undergraduate major is a pressing issue. According to data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, approximately 42% of students who entered college intending to major in education eventually switched to non-education majors during their undergraduate years, while 20% dropped out completely (Chen, 2013). This indicates how even after students initially intend to major in education at an undergraduate institution, a substantial portion do not persist through the program. While some leave school completely, it is more commonplace for undergraduate students to switch majors. In fact, according to Chen (2013), education majors had the highest rate of major switching

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among bachelor degree candidates. This issue of education majors not completing their program is common internationally as well (Chevalier & Dolton, 2004, pp. 14–21; Roberts, 2012). Hence, major persistence may be an important factor explaining reduced numbers of education graduates, and subsequently, the shortfall of qualified teachers.

As undergraduate education majors represent a notable proportion of future teachers, it is crucial to develop a better understanding of who persists in the education major and the relevant factors that influence persistence to help frame a nuanced picture of teacher recruitment and retention. Undergraduate teacher education programs represent the dominant pathway through which teachers are prepared (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009) as 89% of new teachers are prepared through such programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). Among 2008 graduates who majored in education, 79% of the same graduates were teaching in K-12 settings by 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b). As education majors are also used as a proxy by the U.S. Department of Education for students preparing to become teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016c), “education majors” and “pre-service teachers” are used interchangeably for the purposes of this study. Understanding who persists and what factors relate to education majors’ decision to stay or leave the field of study may provide insight into the supply of future teachers.

While we could examine reasons for pre-service teachers switching or dropping out of school, we focused our study on factors that predict persistence among education majors for two reasons. First, maximizing persistence in teacher preparation programs is of education policy interest as many recognize the importance of preparing high quality teachers and the costs of withdrawal from teacher education programs (Bielby et al., 2007; Crowe, 2011; Lin, Childs, & Zhang, 2016; Roberts, 2012). Second, identifying factors that help education majors remain in the major is likely to enhance the effectiveness of education for all teacher candidates whereas focusing only on factors that influence drop-out or switching may identify situations pertinent to only such cases (Graham, Frederick, Byars-Winston, Hunter, & Handelsman, 2013; Lin et al., 2016; Tulip & Lucas, 1991).

Thus, in the present research, we aim to examine the joint effects of several predictors of major persistence, or the decision to continue in the selected major, among education majors. The predictors selected for this study include student engagement, demographic characteristics, academic factors, and institutional characteristics, based on the conceptual framework described in the following section. We foreground engagement in this study for a few reasons. First, engagement has been found to be a key factor for major persistence in the literature (Espinosa, 2011; Evans, 2015; Lichtenstein, McCormick, Sheppard, & Puma, 2010). Moreover, while a substantial body of research supports the impact of engagement on positive student outcomes in higher education (Chen, Ingram, & Davis, 2014; Kuh & Umbach, 2004; Lundberg, 2012; Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010; Rettig & Hu, 2016), engagement has lacked a thorough investigation within teacher education research (Corcoran & O’Flaherty, 2016a; Corcoran & O’Flaherty, 2016b; Corcoran & O’Flaherty, 2017a; Corcoran & Tormey, 2012a; Kim & Corcoran, 2017). Finally, research indicates that engagement is malleable (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Wang & Degol, 2014), providing a unique perspective on potential ways to improve teacher education programs as a whole.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Pre-service teacher commitment and persistence are two closely related concepts (Ajzen, Czasch, & Flood, 2009).

Commitment often refers to the psychological, intentional aspect (Somech & Bogler, 2002), while persistence refers to the actual observed behavior of continuing or discontinuing the program (Roberts, 2012). The literature investigating the pre-service teacher commitment to the profession is well established. Studies indicate that factors such as self-efficacy, stress levels, and interests often predict pre-service teachers’ levels of commitment to the teaching profession (Chesnut & Burley, 2015; Klassen & Chiu, 2011). In a meta-analysis of 33 studies, Chesnut and Burley (2015) underlined that self-efficacy influences pre-service and in-service teachers’ commitment to teaching ( $ES = +0.35$ ) citing Lent, Brown, and Hackett’s (1994) social cognitive career theory in which self-efficacy explains the development of career interests, choices, and success. Conversely, research on pre-service teacher persistence is relatively sparse. That is, there exists a body of work that suggests the psychological orientations of commitment, but a substantial paucity of those that examine observed pre-service teacher behavior in persisting throughout the program.

Indeed, research investigating the persistence of pre-service teachers is relatively sparse (Roberts, 2012) and has mostly involved pre-service teachers in the United Kingdom (Lin et al., 2016). A systematic review of why pre-service teachers leave teacher education programs in the U.K. (Bielby et al., 2007) identified only one study between 2000 and 2006 that examined reasons for withdrawal from teacher education programs. This review underscored the paucity of research in the area of teacher education persistence (Bielby et al., 2007), particularly in the U.S. context. Research has indicated some reasons why U.K. pre-service teachers do not persist in their programs. For instance, Roberts (2012) summarized a number of factors that are related to incompleteness of pre-service teacher education in the U.K. including personal factors, such as family issues, travel, illness (Basit et al., 2006; Chambers, Coles, & Roper, 2002; Chambers, Hobson, & Tracey, 2010; Hobson, Giannakaki, & Chambers, 2009); alternative careers that are more appealing (Chambers et al., 2002, 2010; Hobson et al., 2009); financial difficulties (Basit et al., 2006; Chambers et al., 2010; Hobson et al., 2009); and intra-personal factors such as stress and lack of self-efficacy (Challen, 2005; Chambers et al., 2002, 2010). Many of these studies are qualitative in nature. While there is great need for an in-depth qualitative inquiry into why pre-service teachers persist or leave the program, it is equally important to investigate other possible factors across a larger and more diverse sample of participants.

Thus, instead of focusing on the psychological precursors of persistence, and further expanding the developing literature around pre-service teacher persistence in the U.K., this study seeks to empirically test a framework to better understand factors that may influence pre-service teacher persistence. Specifically, this study draws on Terenzini and Reason’s (2005) framework of student persistence in higher education. It is important to note that the processes involved in persistence in the major may be different from those involved in persistence in higher education generally. However, it has been argued that there is significant overlap between the two areas (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Roberts, 2012; Sklar, 2014). Consequently, this study builds on the established higher education persistence literature as an important conceptual starting point.

Terenzini and Reason’s framework synthesized prominent higher education persistence models by Astin (1993), Tinto (1975), and Pascarella (1985). The result of this synthesis of literature indicated four broad factors that are instrumental in higher education persistence: student precollege characteristics, the organizational context, the student peer environment, and the individual student experience (Fig. 1 in Reason, 2009). The framework assumes that students enter college with varied personal, academic,

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