

Literature Review: Community College Student Persistence

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Introduction

Community colleges have long been considered an opportunity for the education of students who may not attend college otherwise for a variety of reasons. According to Fike and Fike (2008), community colleges tend to have higher numbers of unprepared students due to their open door policies. Because of this, it is no surprise that the persistence and completion rates at community colleges are much lower than at four year universities. The issue of persistence has been extensively studied by scholars for decades. A summary of the literature on student persistence reveals three key themes: factors that put student persistence at risk, factors that foster persistence, and what scholars opine can be done to increase student success.

Student Persistence Risk Factors

Students can face uphill battles on their path to degree completion for a great number of reasons. Economic and financial factors, factors surrounding culture (including race and family), skills gaps, bureaucratic/institutional difficulties, and personal factors can all come into play when considering the factors that put students at risk for non-completion. It is often the case that at risk students have multiple and overlapping risk factors to contend with on their educational journey.

Economic and financial risk factors are particularly important to consider with non-traditional students. Non-traditional students range from students with a gap in time between secondary and post-secondary education, students who work or support families, or students over the age of 22. There is a strong link between work related variables and non-persistence. The literature suggests that students who work greater than part time while attending school are particularly at risk for failing to complete their post-secondary education. Bers and Schuetz

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(2014), for example, discuss how students who work full time and are financially responsible for dependents are one of the most at risk groups. This risk stems from the competing priorities of work, financial pressures, family, and education. While working part time on campus can be beneficial to student persistence, working off campus or working greater than 20 hours negatively impacts student success (Kennamer, Katsinas, & Schumacker, 2010). The lack of quality and affordable child care, Cerven (2013) notes, means that the competing pressures of work, school, and family particularly difficult for single mothers to navigate. Without affordable and reliable child-care, single mothers must choose between school and family. Understandably, Cerven discusses how school falls to the wayside in this situation.

While student financial aid is supposed to lighten the economic burden of post-secondary education, the combination of increasing educational costs and the shift from a reliance on grants to loans plays a negative role in persistence (Kennamer, Katsinas, and Schumacker, 2010). The need to pay back loans represents an important financial burden on students. The negative impact of this shift is greater for first generation students and students from low income families. This demographic of students cannot generally rely on the financial support of their families. Additionally, the families of these students are less likely to be knowledgeable about timelines/deadlines for financial aid and scholarships, and therefore are less able to support the students in this regard (Garcia, 2010). Similarly, Tovar (2015) notes that the families of first generation students are also less likely to be a good source of information in the college admissions process. The shift from grants to loans has particularly affects minority student groups, who are more often first generation and/or low income (Seidman, 2005).

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As noted above, families are important to take into consideration when thinking about student persistence for reasons greater than the financial support they may or may not be able to give students. The intersections of family, culture, and race play a strong role in student persistence. Deli-Amen (2011) discusses the importance of reconsidering early theories, which argued that students were more likely to persist if they cut their emotional and social dependence on their families in order to increase their own independence. Deli-Amen notes that, for minority students, disconnection from their home community may result in social isolation and negatively impact persistence. Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, and McLain (2007) discuss the issue of critical mass for Latino students. When there is a lack of critical mass, the feeling of isolation and loneliness can put students at risk. Similarly, Seidman (2005) discusses how mono-culturalism at many institutions isolates minority students, due to a lack of a critical mass of students of their same background. Along the same lines, Chang (2005) found that in institutions with a tense racial climate and small minority student and faculty populations, minority students have lower persistence levels. Additionally Chang notes that when minority students experience a gap between their culture and those of the faculty, they are less likely to seek help when needed. Minority students and students of color can be faced with culture barriers that include cultural stereotypes, immigration problems, and language limitations (Spellman, 2007). While educational institutions often implement measures to assist at risk students, including students of color, the interventions can often further marginalize students, rather than serve as supportive factors for persistence (Mertes, 2013). Part of the blame in this case rests on the increased costs that come from having to enroll in additional credits for developmental courses. These costs include actual costs such, as tuition fees, as well as opportunity costs, such as wages that may be lost during the time necessary to participate in interventions. Moreover, Nitecki (2011) argues

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that at risk students often do not know about the assistance available because of the lack of communication regarding programs designed to help them.

Mertes stresses the importance of considering the family and culture of minority students in designing retention programs. Neglecting to include family, friends, and minority cultures in advising and retention strategies can marginalize students of color. While ignoring families in constructing the student experience is not a viable strategy, actively unsupportive families also have a strong negative impact on persistence (Cerven, 2013). When students' families actively discourage their pursuit of higher education, because they do not see the value of it, persistence becomes an uphill battle.

Underprepared students have gaps in skills. These gaps may stem from a lack of knowledge about the processes involved in enrollment and financial assistance (Tovar, 2015), or from deficits in basic skills such as math, reading, or writing (Fike, 2008). While developmental education courses are in place at educational institutions to solve these problems, risks may be embedded in participating in these courses. Capps (2012) acknowledges that while successful completion of developmental education courses is related to success, the completion of these courses may not occur because of several issues. Participation in these courses is correlated with delayed graduation times and financial aid difficulties, both of which are related to low persistence. In addition to skills gaps in core areas such as reading, writing, and mathematics, Garcia (2010) discusses the importance of considering the existence of gaps in technology skills. Difficulty with technology can affect students on a variety of levels, including the unfamiliarity with the basic use of computers and course software. Students, particularly low income students, may even lack access to computers and/or the internet. This lack of skills and/or access can

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affect students at even the registration process, as many institutions rely on online registration. For students unfamiliar with technology online classes can be particularly problematic because of the higher reliance on technology and the lower level of structure (Garcia, 2010).

Educational institutions and their bureaucracy can be a problem in and of themselves, negatively impacting persistence. According to the literature, deficiencies in faculty advising are perhaps one of the largest problems. Bers and Schuetz (2014) discuss how students report a strong dissatisfaction with advising. Students noted how poor faculty advising at times led to greater degree completion times, which is related to lower persistence levels. Students report that faculty often do not know which courses are required for degree completion. Capps (2012) and McArthur (2005) also discuss how sub-par faculty advising negatively affects students. McArthur cites a survey in which many students reported ignorance about the availability of faculty advising, while others felt that faculty didn't take advising seriously. The lack of commitment from advisors can serve to de-motivate students.

The sometimes overwhelming bureaucracy in educational institutions is also a source of obstacles. Bers and Schuetz (2014) describe the difficulty of getting transcripts, the confusing information regarding practices, policies, and course catalogs, and the frustrations of getting prior work/educational experience analyzed for credit. Along with these bureaucratic obstacles themselves, Garcia (2010) discusses how students often experience a lack of support in navigating this choppy sea of bureaucracy. Without someone to guide students, they are often left to flounder. As Nitecki (2011) notes, the disconnection between an institution, its services, and students can negatively impact retention. Sometimes the lack of information is the issue, but students may also face information overload. Rosenbaum, Redline, & Stephan (2007) attribute

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the problem of information overload to the incorrect assumption that students have clear plans and can assess what they need to do to fulfill those plans. They argue that oftentimes when students need clarification of existing information, they are bombarded yet again with more information in the form of brochures, catalogs, and meetings. Opposite to its intended purpose, this plethora of information can leave students more confused and lost in the institutional bureaucratic sea.

Additional institutional barriers arise from the lack of a student centered focus. Schuetz (2008) notes that student attrition has historically been viewed as a problem of the student or “something the student does”, rather than a problem of the institution or “something the school produces”. When an institution is student centered, the students tend to be more engaged. Engagement is important because engaged students are more likely to succeed. Schuetz describes how student engagement requires a sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy. Engagement is the default and student engagement will occur unless impeded by some outside force. For example, the lack of evening or weekend courses negatively impacts students who desire to participate, but cannot because they work and care for families. Institutions that lack a student centered focus usually develop policies and practices like these that make engagement and participation difficult for students (Spellman 2007).

Personal barriers are tightly intertwined with other types of barriers such as economic/financial barriers, culture/race/family barriers, skills gaps, and institutional barriers. Personal barriers can range from situational life circumstances to dispositional barriers such as students self-perceptions about their ability to succeed (Spellman 2007). Other personal barriers that can negatively impact persistence are delays in starting college (gap in time between

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secondary and post-secondary education) and part-time enrollment (Bers and Schuetz, 2014).

When considering the issue of student persistence, it is important to recognize that students often face multiple and overlapping barriers that interact, increasing the effects of personal barriers exponentially.

Factors that Foster Persistence

While there are a host of factors that can make persistence problematic for students, there are also several factors that can serve to boost or support persistence, especially for non-traditional students. Factors related to persistence include: culture, race, or family; addressing skills gaps; or the reduction of institutional/bureaucratic factors.

Our family, race, and culture play a large part in shaping who we are. Particularly for minority students, the importance of family support cannot be underestimated. While in the absence of family support students are less likely to persist, supportive families can greatly contribute to persistence. Cerven (2013) and Barbatis (2010) both stress how important the help of family and friends can be in managing the competing demands of school, work, and family life, as well as in navigating the intricacies of college bureaucracy. Feeling that one is not alone can be a powerful motivator for students while they are in the difficult process of working towards furthering their education. While family is important, students can also gain support from others on campus. Deil-Amen (2011) posits that when students have consistent access to students that are similar to them, persistence is boosted. Along these same lines, Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, and McLain (2007) argue that when there is a critical mass of Latino students, those students tend to have higher grade point averages (GPA) and higher success ratios. The authors

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stress the idea that critical mass does not refer exclusively to the student body, as like faculty can increase the availability of role models and foster a sense of belonging and social integration. Not feeling alone and being well supported, whether that be by family, friends, or like students, helps students to persist.

Gaps in skills, both basic skills and life skills, can work against student success, but the literature suggests that there are several strategies that can address this issue. Fontaine (2014) discusses success with programs that require an extensive orientation period. These programs went far beyond the traditional orientation and included an emphasis on building skills necessary for success, such as time management, study skills, and how to access available support programs. The simultaneous participation in classes addressing basic skills gaps, and in learning communities has also shown to increase retention rates. Barbatis (2010) found that students who were involved in both developmental classes and learning communities together had higher retention rates when compared to students who only took part in developmental classes. Addressing gaps in skills within a learning community allows students to develop skills in a supportive environment. Academic learning communities have been described as safe places to learn where students can participate, ask questions, and reflect on their experience (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008). Learning communities help students to become more academically and socially engaged and are another means of providing invaluable support. Heiman (2010) found similar benefits for students who took part in programs that teach higher level learning skills (rather than rote memory skills). A program called “Learning to Learn” was successful in increasing GPA. Additionally, students completed more courses and had higher levels of retention and success rates.

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While student attrition has been generally perceived as a student problem, rather than an institutional one (Schuetz, 2008), some educational institutions have experimented with strategies that have proved successful in increasing retention and persistence rates. The quality of faculty advising can make or break a student's ability to succeed. Chang (2005) claims that frequent and meaningful interaction with faculty is positively related to persistence, as it diversifies student support structures. Tovar (2015) argues that Latino students who have higher levels of faculty student interaction outside of class, along with higher rates of participation in support services, tend to have higher GPA's. McArthur (2005) reports better retention results when academic advisors are required to meet with students and when advisors have a limited number of advisees. Similarly, Fike and Fike (2008) found that when students are required to meet regularly with advisors, complete mid-term grade checks, and complete a long-term plan of study, students have higher success rates. Faculty student interaction, whether in an advising relationship or an instructor student relationship, is instrumental to persistence. Access to faculty is especially important to minority students, and it should not be limited to advising and in-class interactions. Access to instructors beyond the formal structures of class help to integrate students into the academic setting (Deil-Amen, 2011).

In addition to ensuring quality faculty-student interactions, institutions can also develop robust student support services. Student support programs are important as they help students to navigate bureaucracy, provide information on assistance programs, and often include counseling services (Cerven, 2013). There are several formats of student support that institutions can offer. Fontaine (2014) discusses success in support programs that include the facilitation of peer tutoring/mentoring, learning communities, counseling (academic, personal, and career), and life

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skills training. Institutions have also found success by fostering interaction between students via on-campus clubs and organizations (Barbatis, 2010).

What Can be Done to Increase Persistence

While there is a current focus on the problems associated with student retention, the literature suggests there is more that can be done to increase persistence. Scholars have suggested possible ways in which institutions can address negative economic/financial factors, cultural factors (including race and family), skills gaps, bureaucratic/institutional difficulties, and limitations in student personal support. To address barriers related to economic and financial factors related to the actual costs of pursuing post-secondary education, Kennamer, Katsinas, and Schumacker (2010) suggest that steps must be taken to reform financial aid and increase assistance dramatically to above recent tuition increase levels. They stress the need to focus on grants for low income students, rather than aid only in the form of student loans. Hagedorn Perrakis, and Maxwell (2007) remind us that this financial aid support should not be limited to those in traditional universities or community colleges, but that adequate financial support should be included for students in vocational and occupational programs. Beyond financial aid assistance to address economic and financial factors, Cerven (2013) suggests that institutions should provide high quality and affordable childcare on campus. Additionally, the Cerven advocates for the creation of collaborative relationships between county welfare departments and campus support systems. This connection between the learning institution and non-educational institution can provide well rounded support that will benefit students.

The literature also offers suggestions that relate to the importance of family, culture, and racial issues. First, families must be involved in and included in the student's educational life.

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Barbatis (2010) suggests that institutions develop programs and strategies that involve family networks, especially in the case of minority students. These programs should be ongoing and provide a wide range of information to students and their family such as degree requirements, financial aid information, and contact information. Barbatis also suggest the creation of family advisory councils that meet at least once per term with the option of co-enrolling students and family members in life skills courses or seminars. Similar to Barbatis, Mertes (2013) also focuses on the inclusion of family into efforts surrounding recruitment and retention. Mertes states that all marketing and informational should be aimed at both the student and their families because this will give students more support to navigate the environment of academia. Tovar (2015) mirrors the idea of family inclusion by stating that institutions must create orientation programs for students and their families in order to familiarize them with academic life, available support services, academic and financial deadlines, and issues that students often face. Mertes also suggests that retention programs should be initiated earlier than the first year of study. To make minority students ready for the rigors of academics, interventions should be started during high school.

Minority students, both historically and currently, have lower retention levels when compared to their dominant culture counterparts. Advisors can play an important role in keeping students in school. Mertes (2013) suggests that advisors be trained in and have a basic understanding of how to communicate with students and family that primarily speak a language other than English at home. While it is acknowledged that advisors cannot possibly be fluent in all languages, Mertes stresses the importance of having training and information on hand that is aimed at cross cultural communication. Also addressing the role of advisors, Siedman (2005) points out that faculty student interaction should be facilitated early on and be continuous

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throughout the student's academic career. In order to keep students well-grounded in their culture, Siedman notes that institutions as a whole must provide opportunities for students to form lasting bonds with others in their culture. One specific suggestion he provides is the creation of robust mentoring programs that link first time students of all ethnic backgrounds together to help students acculturate into the college community. While advising and mentoring is beneficial, Tovar (2015) posits that formal mentoring programs should go far beyond typical student support programs. All support staff should be trained as mentors. Support staff and instructors must be provided assistance in developing cultural awareness/competence. Additionally instructors should be trained in the use of culturally relevant pedagogies. Seidman (2005) echoes this sentiment by suggesting that schools intentionally create opportunities for diverse perspectives in the classroom by involving students and faculty from many different backgrounds. Cultural sensitivity is imperative, but faculty must also take steps to increase interaction and reach out to minority students, especially students who have recently immigrated (Chang, 2005). Accounting for differences based on race and culture is necessary, but Chaves (2006) highlights the importance of recognizing differences in learning preferences and perspectives for women, as well and structuring classroom activities with these differences in mind. Recognizing, accounting for, and appreciating the wide range of difference among students can make a difference in retention.

Numerous scholars have studied the role of the lack of skills (basic skills and life skills) in the retention puzzle. Turning a lens on basic skills, Barbatis (2010) suggests that developmental courses such as math, reading, and writing should be based on adult learning concepts, rather than sticking to the traditional model taught in high school. Basing courses on adult learning and experiences may help to combat the common perception amongst students that

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developmental courses are punitive in nature and not helpful in degree attainment. The author recognizes that participation in developmental courses often extends graduation dates, thus putting students at risk for attrition. Barbatis and others (Capps, 2012) argue that institutions must work to embed basic skills into degree related classes. This method of simultaneous mastery of basic skills and course content allows students to earn credit towards a degree while gaining necessary skills for success. Capps also acknowledges the importance of the establishment of instructor learning communities in which various instructors plan their course content together so that students can practice the basic skills of reading and writing at a college level.

Success in an academic program requires basic skills as well as other life skills. Barbatis argues that institutions should offer courses focused on skills leading to success such as time management, goal setting, and educational planning. Both Fontaine (2014) and Kefallinou (2009) posit that institutions should mandate extensive orientation programs that make expected behavior clear, build skills for success, familiarize students with the demands of the program and campus, and provides students training in time management. Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell (2007) suggest workshop formats that teach students study skills, include tutoring programs, and general support to students. These authors also note that institutions must account for gaps in technology skills and provide assistance with the availability and use of technology. Heiman (2010) takes the idea of providing skills training beyond the workshop or orientation and argues for a sustained system to teach students metacognitive strategies. She focuses on the strategies of looking for feedback, breaking down complex concepts into component parts, and working towards explicit learning goals. Students should be supported through regular check-ins from faculty and counselors before classes and at break times, as well as through formal weekly

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check-ins. Heiman argues that focusing on these metacognitive strategies can have an early and strong payoff, allowing students to use the skills on a daily basis. McClenney and Waiwaiole (2005) suggest programs similar to those noted by Barbatis and by Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell, but also argue for an integration of computer skills and computerized classrooms to allow students to build valuable technology skills.

Institutional practices can both hinder and help students. The importance of the establishment of systems that allow for the tracking and monitoring of students' failures and successes has been addressed by many scholars. Garcia (2010) argues for the adoption of a system called "intrusive advising". Intrusive advising is based on the proactive reaching out to students who are struggling, by advisors who are trained as retention coaches. The ability to do this, argues Garcia, is dependent upon the establishment of an intensive student monitoring system that gathers data in order to create solutions to keep students in school before any potential problem becomes too large to overcome. Capps (2012) advocates a similar early alert system to reach out to students. Along the same lines as intrusive advising, Capps suggests that institutional practices be grounded in the student at all levels. This includes validating students as individuals through advising and support staff that knows students at personal level. This personal knowledge of students and their lives allows advisors and support staff to better address the problems students experience. Going beyond simple information distribution helps encourage students, makes them know their concerns are valid, and facilitates coaching to overcome barriers. Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell (2007) report that institutions must make moves to incorporate experienced teachers as resources for students. Unlike adjuncts, experienced teachers are more likely to have office space and office hours, making themselves more available to students. Ultimately, Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell argue for the

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development of long-term relationships between students and teachers through consistent and reliable teachers. Similarly, Roman (2007) notes that schools must also focus on good admissions staff to guide students through the process of admission while making expectations clear. The author stresses the importance of moving away from a focus on enrollment targets, to a focus on bringing in students that are ready for school.

Institutions can also support retention by working actively to create connections between students and faculty as well among students themselves. Deil-Amen (2011) suggests that colleges take the initiative to create connections through learning communities and modified cohort models that allow multiple methods of cohort interaction. The importance of learning communities is a common thread in the literature. Enstrom and Tinto (2008) state that institutions must work with care to create learning communities that require more than just co-registration. Students and instructors must have close relationships, with learning roles that move back and forth between instructors and students. These communities become collaborative spaces that can create powerful connections among students, between students and faculty, and with support services on campus.

Additional services that institutions can provide are job placement services and internships that help students to gain experience and skills that will place them at an advantage in the job market (Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2007). Institutions must also provide quality physical space and auxiliary services, such as student centers, cafeterias, and spaces for students to study in groups (Hagedorn, Perrakis, & Maxwell, 2007). Fontaine points out that the mere presence of student support services is not useful unless there is sufficient staffing to carry out any intervention/support programs.

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Learning institutions are by no means immune to the difficulties and frustrations of large bureaucratic organizations. Hagedorn, Perrakis, Maxwell (2007) acknowledge the bureaucratic difficulties that students face and argued for the elimination of redundant paperwork. All staff and administration, they argue, must work together to ensure and enhance the ability of all departments and offices to operate effectively. Similarly, Nitecki (2011) stresses the importance of de-bureaucratization in the effort to help students persist.

Taking into account the busy lives of non-traditional students, Hagedorn, Perrakis, and Maxwell (2007) note that students can more easily piece together a schedule of courses that fits into their lives if institutions create a wide variety of scheduling options for required classes. Along the same lines, Fike and Fike (2008) stress the importance of flexible scheduling, along with the availability of online courses. Bers and Schuetz (2014) state that colleges must be more proactive by encouraging students to complete programs early and providing students information about certificates. Certificates can be valuable, and colleges should be active in making students understand their value. Colleges should also make the effort to let students know what classes in their academic program may count towards certificates.

While some students attend educational institutions like community colleges with the hopes of acquiring certificates/certification, associates degrees, or bachelor's degrees, many students attend community colleges with the intent to eventually transfer to a traditional four-year learning institution. Both Miller (2013) and Nitecki (2011) advocate for collaboration between community colleges and four-year institutions to create articulation and transfer agreements. Miller stresses the importance of creating a transfer culture with faculty at community colleges and at four-year institutions. This involves both types of institutions

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working together in the design of developmental courses and of the criteria for transfers. The goal is to support students from both ends throughout the various stages of their academic pathway.

Community colleges play an important role in providing educational opportunities for people who otherwise would not be able to grasp the benefits of post-secondary education. While certainly imperfect, they play a valuable part in our educational system as a whole. Because of the lower persistence rates when compared to four-year universities, there is still much work left to be done to improve their effectiveness. Scholars have turned their lens towards community colleges in order understand how to do just that. Their studies have focused on risk factors, persistence factors, but perhaps most importantly, they have used this knowledge to provide suggestions for solving the persistence problem.

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