

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT TO IMPROVE COLLEGE STUDENT PERSISTENCE

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College student retention constitutes a long-standing and critical problem for many colleges and universities. Although the average national rate of first-to-second year persistence stands at 68.5%, rates for types of colleges and universities vary from a low of 56.4% for 2-year public colleges to a high of 81.5% for private PhD-granting universities (American College Testing Program [ACT], 2016). Put differently, the percentage of first-year students that do not return to their institution of initial enrollment ranges from 43.6% in 2-year public colleges to 18.5% in private PhD-granting universities.

Such a loss of students negatively affects the stability of institutional enrollments, budgets, and the public perception of the quality of colleges and universities. For these reasons, institutional retention rates occupy the attention of institutional leaders in colleges and universities. Hagedorn (2005) posits that retention is an institutional measure whereas persistence is a student measure. Put differently, institutions retain students and students persist. Accordingly, institutional efforts to increase their retention rates depend on increasing the persistence of their students. Institutional efforts to increase their student persistence rates include institutional studies designed to understand student persistence, assessment of programs designed to increase

student persistence, and assessments of the college student experience and environment (Braxton, McKinney, & Reynolds, 2006; Jones & Braxton, 2009).

In this article, we focus on organizational factors that indirectly influence first-year student persistence in both commuter and residential colleges and universities as found by Braxton et al. (2014) in *Rethinking College Student Retention*. We posit that these organizational factors constitute critical dimensions for institutional assessment of the college student experience and the environment as well as their inclusion in theory-based institutional studies of student persistence. The results of such institutional assessment of these two organizational factors can provide institutional practitioners with an empirically grounded basis for the development and implementation of institutional efforts to increase student persistence at their college or university.

The Two Organizational Factors

These organizational factors include student perceptions of institutional integrity, and commitment of the institution to student welfare. These two organizational factors constitute key concepts in the Revised Theory of Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities and in the Theory of Student Persistence

in Commuter Colleges and universities described in *Rethinking College Student Retention* (2014) by Braxton et al. *Rethinking College Student Retention* also includes the findings of empirical tests of these two theories.

THE COMMITMENT OF THE INSTITUTION TO STUDENT WELFARE

This notion manifests itself as an institution's abiding concern for the growth and development of its students (Braxton et al., 2014). An institution committed to the welfare of its students also clearly communicates the high value it places on students in groups as well as individuals (Braxton et al., 2014). The equitable treatment of students and respect for them as individuals constitute additional aspects of this organizational attribute (Braxton et al., 2014).

Commitment of the institution to student welfare coincides with Joseph Hermanowicz's (2003) concept of "enforced success." He derived this concept from case studies of four highly selective research universities that vary in their retention rates (Hermanowicz, 2003). The university with the highest retention rate has what Hermanowicz (2003) terms a culture of enforced success. He adds that in such a culture all students are treated as if they are at risk, and key people believe in the promise of each student in a fervently held way (Hermanowicz, 2003).

INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY

Institutional integrity is the extent to which a college or university is true to its espoused mission and goals (Braxton et al., 2014). Institutional integrity demonstrates itself when the actions of a college or university's administrators, faculty, and staff are compatible with the mission and goals proclaimed by a given college or university (Braxton et al., 2014). For example, institutions that espouse multiculturalism but take no action when racial discrimination takes place are not displaying institutional integrity.

Clearly, the dimensions of these two organizational factors flow from the culture of a given college or university. Tierney (1988) asserts that the culture of a college or university reveals itself in "what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it." Put differently, institutional actions, decisions, and communications flow from institutional culture.

Enrollment managers can work with other college or university administrators, staff members, and clerical workers to follow imperatives that reinforce the commitment of the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity, imperatives that incur little or no direct financial costs to the institution (Braxton et al., 2014). We refer readers interested in these nine imperatives to *Rethinking College Student Retention* (Braxton et al., 2014). These nine imperatives work to reinforce the two organizational factors as attributes of the culture of a given college or university.

Theoretical and Empirical Role of These Two Organizational Factors in College Student Persistence

As previously stated, these two organizational factors constitute key concepts in both the Revised Theory of Student Persistence in Residential Institutions and in the Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities. In the Revised Theory of Student Persistence in Residential Institutions, both commitment of the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity function as antecedents to social integration (Braxton et al., 2014).

This theory also hypothesizes that social integration positively influences subsequent institutional commitment, which, in turn, positively influences first-year student persistence in residential colleges and universities.

Braxton et al. (2014) test this theory in eight private religiously affiliated colleges and universities. Of the sample of 408 students that responded to the survey, nearly 60% were female and 19% were non-white. Institutional integrity and commitment of the institution to student welfare (see appendix for the questions that comprise these scales) had respective means of 2.94 and 3.11 (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). Put differently, most students agreed that their institutions exhibited integrity and were committed to student welfare. Braxton et al. learned that both of these organizational factors positively influence student perceptions of their social integration. Moreover, student perceptions of the commitment of the institution to student welfare also positively influence their subsequent institutional

commitment. To complete the loop of student persistence, Braxton et al. found that social integration positively influences subsequent institutional commitment, which, in turn, positively affects first-year student persistence in residential colleges and universities.

In the Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities, Braxton et al. (2014) hypothesized that both institutional integrity and commitment of the institution to student welfare function as antecedents of student perceptions of their academic and intellectual development. According to this theory, academic and intellectual development positively influence subsequent institutional commitment, which, in turn, influences first-year student persistence in a positive way.

The sample of students from five state-supported commuter colleges ($N = 714$) was similar to the residential sample on basic demographic characteristics: About 55% of the sample were female and 17% were nonwhite. The scale for institutional integrity had the same mean score as in the residential institutions (2.94), and mean for commitment of the institution to student welfare was 3.00 on the same 4-point Likert scale. The test of this theory showed that both of these organizational factors positively influence student perceptions of their academic and intellectual development (Braxton et al., 2014). Moreover, student perceptions of the institutional integrity of their college or university also positively influences subsequent institutional commitment (Braxton et al., 2014). Per the theory, Braxton et al. (2014) also found that academic and intellectual development positively influences subsequent institutional commitment, which, in turn, positively affects first-year student persistence in commuter colleges and universities.

Thus, commitment of the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity stand as theory-based empirically supported organizational factors that indirectly influence student persistence in both residential and commuter colleges and universities.

Further Evidence

In this section, we present additional evidence of the indirect and direct role these two organizational factors play in first-year college student persistence. We derive

this additional evidence from the findings of studies that were capstone projects completed by EdD students at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. The successful completion of a capstone project is a requirement for the EdD at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. These projects entail the execution of studies designed to address problems identified by a college or university that sponsors a capstone project. Table 1 shows capstone projects that provide additional support for the two focal organizational factors.

To elaborate, these capstone projects entailed single-institutional tests of the Revised Theory of Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities and the Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities. As indicated by Table 1, the findings of these capstone projects indicate that institutional integrity and commitment of the institution to student welfare are indeed strong predictors of the most important antecedents to student persistence. Indeed, all of the studies shown in Table 1 come from a diverse array of colleges and universities.

Recommendations for Institutional Action

Institutional research plays an important part in enrollment management (Hossler & Bean, 1990). Offices of institutional research conduct analytical

Table 1. Single-Institutional Tests of the Influence of Institutional Integrity and Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare on Social Integration

Authors	Institution
Full support for both organizational factors	
Adams, Ashford, & Taylor (2010)	Rhodes College
Artis & Overton (2010)	Tusculum College
Domas & Hicks (2008)	Kentucky Wesleyan
Drake & Jacobs (2011)	Small Catholic University
Fowles & Hayden (2009)	Lindsey Wilson College
Support for only Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare	
Day, Flynn, & Moore (2015)	University of Memphis
Henderson, Burton-Krieger, & McClendon (2016)	Birmingham Southern College

studies to inform institutional decision and policy making as well as to improve institutional functioning (Hossler & Bean, 1990). When centered on institutional issues such as understanding student persistence, such institutional research activities serve the function of strategic enrollment management. Thus, a critical relationship exists institutional research and strategic enrolment management (Cheslock & Kroc, 2012).

We offer a set of recommendation for the use of the organizational factors of the commitment of the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity by institutional research. The appendix to this article contains items that measure these two organizational factors. Braxton et al. (2014) used these items to measure the two organizational factors in their tests of the two theories previously described. The measurement of commitment of the institution to student welfare involves the computation of a composite scale of the nine items listed under “Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare” in the appendix. The measurement of institutional integrity entails the computation of a composite scale of the five items categorized under “Institutional Integrity” in the appendix. We encourage institutional research officers to make use of these survey items in their efforts to follow the recommendations we advance. Our recommendations follow:

1. The empirical support provided both the Revised Theory of Student Persistence in Residential Colleges and Universities and the Theory of Student Persistence in Commuter Colleges and Universities suggest that institutional research offices should use these two theories in their efforts to describe and understand student persistence at their college or university. The value of institutional persistence studies greatly increases with the use of theory as a framework for conducting such studies. Theory-based studies are valuable because the findings lead to an understanding of the student persistence process in a given college or university. Such an understanding provides the basis for formulation of recommendations for institutional policy and practice, reliable implementation (fidelity) of policies and practices, and a basis for adjustments or changes in the policy or practice (Braxton et al., 2014).

2. As a default to conducting theory-based studies of student persistence, we urge institutional research offices to conduct institutional assessments using commitment of the institution and institutional integrity as dimensions of such assessments. Institutional scores on the measurement of these two organizational factors could serve as a baseline for studies of the status of these two factors overtime. Accordingly, we recommend that institutional research offices make use of the survey items included in the appendix to this article. These items could take the form of a stand-alone assessment instrument or as a supplement to other assessment instruments used by institutional research offices. The content of these items point to ways for institutional improvement. For example, student disagreement with the statement of item 5, “In general, student services staff treat students with respect,” suggests that student services staff members need to be encouraged to treat students with more respect.

Moreover, Pascarella (1986) recommends the empirical assessment of the efficacy of policies and practices designed to increase college student retention. Such assessments constitute one of the efforts used by colleges and universities to address student persistence at their institution (Braxton et al., 2006; Jones & Braxton, 2009). An approach to the assessment of the efficacy of institutional policies and practices entails the administration of an organizational assessment instrument containing measures of commitment to the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity before a policy or practice has been implemented and then after the policy or practice has been implemented. Changes in the magnitude of student perceptions of the commitment of the institution to student welfare and to institutional integrity provide a basis for gauging the effectiveness of the focal institutional policy or practice designed to increase student persistence.

3. We recommend that institutional researchers consider the use of the method of analytical cascading to identify factors that positively influence these two organizational characteristics. In

Rethinking College Student Retention, Braxton and Colleagues (2014) used analytical cascading to identify those factors that wield an influence on these two organizational factors. Analytical cascading yields more specific theory-based recommendations for policy and practice designed to improve student persistence. This approach is particularly useful in commuter colleges and universities where obligations such as work and family shape the daily routines of many commuter students (Tinto, 1993).

This assertion gives rise to the question: How can commuter colleges and universities accommodate the hectic schedules of commuter students? Possible institutional accommodations include offering classes at times convenient to students, having university offices that serve students open at times convenient for students who work, having “drop-in” child-care services, and having physical facilities for students to study and type papers. Other possible accommodations include having a physical space open on weekends, having the university library being open during the weekend, having eating facilities open during times convenient for commuting students, making commuting to and from campus as convenient as possible, having ample parking on campus for commuting students, and having parking convenient to the classes of students.

With analytical cascading, institutional research offices can empirically identify those institutional policies and practices that positively influence either commitment of the institution to student welfare or institutional integrity in commuter institutions. For example, Braxton et al. (2014) learned that provision of student services open at times convenient for students positively affects student perception of the commitment of their institution to the welfare of its students and of institutional integrity in commuter colleges and universities.

4. Profiles of students at risk for early departure from both residential and commuter colleges and universities include students who hold unfavorable perceptions of the two organizational factors at

their college or university (Braxton, Hartley, & Lyken-Segosebe 2015). We recommend that institutional research offices assist academic advisors in the use of the items in the appendix to develop information forms to give to their advisees for completion. Alternately, academic advisors could use these items to formulate questions to ask advisees during advising sessions (Braxton et al., 2015). If advisors determine through either an information form or responses to questions during an advising session that an advisee holds unfavorable perceptions of the commitment of the institution to the welfare of its students or of the integrity of the institution, then the advisor can take actions that help advisees form more favorable perceptions of these two organizational factors. In their book chapter titled “Students at Risk in Residential and Commuter Colleges and Universities,” Braxton et al. (2015) suggest a range of such actions for academic advisors in both commuter and residential colleges and universities to take.

Closing Thoughts

We highly recommend the use of the two organizational factors of the commitment of the institution to student welfare and institutional integrity in institutional assessments conducted by institutional research offices. We likewise recommend that institutional research offices make use of the items included in the appendix to this article. The four recommendations we put forth suggest ways institutional research offices can make use of the two organizational factors in institutional and individual assessment as well as to provide a basis for the development of institutional policy and action. To do so situates organizational assessment and action on the rock-bed of theoretically driven empirical research. Through organizational assessment of these two organizational factors and the delineation of recommendations for institutional policy and action, institutional research drives the work of strategic enrollment management toward the proactive control of the size and characteristics of the students enrolled through efforts to increase institutional rates of student retention.

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Appendix: Survey Items to Measure the Organizational Factors of Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare and Institutional Integrity

Following is a list of statements that may characterize your university. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement as it applies to your experiences (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree).

1. Most student services staff (e.g., dean of students office, student activities, housing, etc.) with whom I have had contact with are genuinely interested in students.
2. Most other college/university staff (e.g., registrar, student accounts, financial aid, etc.) with whom I have had contact with are genuinely interested in students.
3. I have experienced negative interactions with student services staff (reverse coded).
4. I have experienced negative interactions with other college/university staff (reverse coded).
5. In general, student services staff treat students with respect.
6. In general, other college/university staff treat students with respect.
7. In general, I know where to go if I need more information about a policy.

8. In general, faculty members treat students with respect.
9. I have experienced negative interactions with faculty members (reverse coded).

INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY

Following is a list of statements that may characterize your university. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement as it applies to your experiences (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree).

1. The actions of the administration are consistent with the stated mission of this institution.
2. My university almost always does the right thing.
3. The values of this university are communicated clearly to the campus community.
4. Since I have been a student here, the rules of this university appear in harmony with the values the institution espouses.
5. Since I have been a student here, the decisions made at this university rarely conflict with the values it espouses.

Source: Braxton et al. (2014), Table A.1 and Table A.5.