

Example of research paper on minority student retention and graduation rates tran...

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Minority Student Retention and Graduation Rates: Translating Quantitative Studies into Actionable Results

Minority students make up approximately one-third of total student enrollment in America's post-secondary institutions. Recent studies have shown that approximately 40 percent of African-American students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities can expect to graduate, while slightly less than half of Hispanic students remain in school (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012). There are a number of key academic, financial and social factors that dictate low minority graduation rates in the United States, and each has been the subject of qualitative research aimed at understanding what should be done to bring about measurable improvement. There is a general perception that diversity is increasingly important given the current economic environment, which is characterized by an ever-widening gap between the wealthy and the middle class. But despite federal and state efforts to alleviate the financial burden, minority college students find themselves particularly vulnerable to crippling tuition loan debt and academic institutions that exhibit little understanding or concern for diversity issues beyond enrollment.

In 2005, Alan Seidman published a report entitled "Minority Student Retention: Resources for Practitioners." Seidman approached the issue of minority graduation rates from the standpoint of student retention. A pioneer in the scholarly study of post-secondary student retention, Seidman notes that while minority students are entering college at a higher rate than ever before, they are also leaving at a higher rate than non-minorities (2005). The

report breaks down retention factors and findings based on social and economic factors, as well as by specific

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minority groups, including African-Americans, American Indians and Hispanics. One particularly notable feature of Seidman's report is its review of the history of literature on, and awareness of, the subject in general. In particular, there has been a tendency to view drop-out rates and variables based on socio-cultural differences between ethnicities; Seidman's aim is to discern commonalities among his subject group.

Seidman's rationale for selecting a qualitative method of study is that data can be used to extrapolate which aspects of the college experience contribute the most to student academic success and retention (2005). As well, comparative data from the National Survey of Student Engagement was deemed highly useful in distinguishing deterministic benchmarks, including:

Level of academic challenge

Active/collaborative learning

Enriching educational experiences

Supportive campus environment (Seidman, 2005)

These benchmarks offer key supporting information concerning student involvement; academic achievement/progress; social opportunities; and extent of interaction with non-minority students (Seidman, 2005). The report paints a comprehensive picture of key factors in retaining minority students through to graduation. It also provides useful information concerning

predictive methods for identifying young students who are more likely to succeed at the college level. However, more detailed statistical data might provide a more well-rounded and actionable assessment of the situation.

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In her report “Hispanic Students in Higher Education,” Eva Martinez asserts that the “alarmingly low” rate of college graduation among Hispanics should be a matter of deep concern to “all stakeholders in society” (2010). As in the Seidman study, Martinez is concerned with determining the precise factors that impact both the retention/graduation and pre-graduation loss of Hispanic university students. Martinez’s ultimate aim is to produce recommendations rather than conclusions in the interest of improving a chronic problem. Therefore, this “qualitative study is conducted to find out what factors influence the experiences of Hispanic college students and what types of support services are accessible to target the needs of this population” (Martinez, 2010).

This methodology adopted a case study approach designed to provide unique insights, gather perspectives and direct the data analysis (Martinez, 2010). Martinez interacted directly with subjects and used this input to compare perspectives. “The emergence of various perspectives is what makes a case study grounded in theory work,” Martinez notes (2010). In order to gather as many divergent perspectives as possible, Martinez concentrated her efforts on predominantly white, Midwestern universities rather than institutions in parts of the country in which Hispanics are more widely represented. The data compiled was extrapolated in order to identify

commonalities and patterns. Some of the key findings revealed that among Hispanic students support services are vitally important, as these contribute signally to a feeling of belonging and community, to which Hispanic students appear to respond quite favorably. Ultimately, the most important factor had to do with academic preparation, both in high school and college, which most Hispanic students felt had been inadequate in readying them for the overall college experience.

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Martinez's design appears to have worked well from the standpoint of gathering a wealth of anecdotal information. As mentioned, it was the researcher's intent to determine exactly what is necessary from a practical standpoint and, to this end, Martinez appears to have succeeded in identifying a number of recommendations, including the integration of social support services such as bridge programs and specially appointed faculty advisors schooled in the particular needs of ethnic students. Better academic support services were determined to be particularly needful. Though exhaustive and thorough, Martinez's report seemed to offer too few practical applications. Another such report might benefit from a more panoramic view of the situation, which could encompass input from, for example, high school educators and counselors and college admittance officials with an eye toward illuminating the academic problems that Hispanic students face once they reach college.

In 2011, Quentin Alexander published a paper that takes a more "drilled down" look at the post-secondary minority experience. Alexander

studied the adjustment problems experienced by African-American students who transfer from traditionally black community-based institutions to predominantly white graduate schools. Alexander utilized one-on-one interviews, demographic questionnaires and field notes in determining the key themes that describe the graduate experiences of African-Americans. Once collected, the data was codified through an iteration strategy (Alexander, 2011). Alexander uncovered a number of recurrent themes, including distrust, academic frustration, negative emotionality, non-cohesive African-American (student) communities, racial “ microaggressions” and resilience (2011).

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The study revealed that African-American retention rates at “ traditionally” white southern universities mirrored the overall retention rate among black students, which hovers at around the rate of 40 percent (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2012). Alexander found that social adjustment factors caused significant problems for African-American students who were accustomed to the emotional and social support of a larger African-American community and students from that community in under-graduate programs. Once they reached larger, predominantly white universities, students encountered white peer stereotyping of African-Americans (Alexander, 2011). From an academic standpoint, black students suffered from difficulties in finding study partners/companions and receptive social outlets (2011). Unlike Martinez’s study of Hispanic students, Alexander found that SAT scores and high school grade point averages were less reliable

predictors of success at the college level. Such quantifiable factors “ failed to take into account the less tangible social and psychological factors that may lead to” students dropping out of college (2011).

This study, while offering interesting insights into the challenges that minority students face, examined a somewhat too-narrow slice of the available subject group. However, the methodology, interpretation and results were appropriate given the confined parameters of the study. A more expansive approach would be to incorporate the overall minority experience in southern universities, perhaps placing Hispanic, American Indian and Asian experiences within the context of their native communities and examining the hurdles they face in transitioning to institutions with strong regional identification. These studies do not raise particular ethical considerations, though it could be argued that such studies do as much to further stereotypical perceptions of minority students as they do to reveal causes and identify solutions.

References

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