

CLINGING TO THE DREAM: PREDICTING PERSISTENCE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

For young adults who are the first in their families to attend college (“first-generation college students”), earning a college degree is not only an exciting dream but also a practical path to upward mobility. These students face numerous challenges that impact their motivation and intent to persist towards their degrees, and institutions of higher education would benefit from identifying the variables that promote or discourage persistence. A survey on college persistence was conducted at a Southern California university serving a majority of first-generation college students. A total of 578 students (women = 69%, first-generation students = 63%) between the ages of 18 and 51 years (mean age = 18.9) responded to the online survey assessing persistence, academic and social burden, social support, instructor support, sense of belonging, and academic self-efficacy. Regression models with persistence as the primary outcome were tested for first-generation and non-first-generation respondents. Results revealed that for first-generation students, sense of belonging was the strongest predictor of persistence, while instructor support and academic self-efficacy were also significant predictors in the model; together, the variables explained 21% of the variance in persistence. For non-first-generation students, academic self-efficacy was the strongest predictor, with sense of belonging also being a significant predictor in the model; together, the variables explained 24% of the variance of persistence. These findings will be discussed in the context implications for pedagogy as well as institutional policies.

Keywords: *College students, academic persistence, academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging.*

1. Clinging to the dream: Predicting persistence among college students

Three current trends in higher education are vying with each other for the dominant narrative about the value of a college degree. First, while universities used to be reserved mostly for children whose parents also went to college, in today’s competitive job market it is expected that most successful candidates will have earned a college degree. Simultaneously, students and their families are questioning the value of higher education, given its rising costs and perceived weak links to practical skills needed in the workforce. Third, while most colleges accept and register large numbers of students, their retention and graduation rates are alarmingly low, with an average graduation rate of only 41% in the USA (ThinkImpact, 2021). For first-generation college (FGC) students (those whose parents have not attended college), persisting towards a degree poses even more difficulties (Rendón, 1994); yet getting this degree may be the path for upward mobility for the whole family (Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018).

Researchers in higher education make a distinction between retention, a construct referring to the actual number of college students who return to campus from semester to semester, and college persistence, which refers to a set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the college student linked to continuing on with one’s college education (Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009). Retention rates are significantly lower for fresh students returning for their sophomore year, with retention rates for FGC students significantly lower than for those whose parents have attended college. Persistence on the part of fresh students strongly predicts retention in their second year. For these reasons, it is worth considering the variables associated with keeping students, particularly FGC students, persisting towards their degree.

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Currently there is a substantial body of research that has identified psychological variables that keep students persisting in college. Social support and academic self-efficacy are two that have been examined extensively. Social support is a socioemotional construct, and can be defined as the perceived availability of help and encouragement from others, or “resources provided by one’s interpersonal ties” (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Social support has been reliably linked to academic success (Katreviceh & Aruguete, 2017). Academic self-efficacy is defined as confidence in one’s abilities to successfully complete academic tasks such taking good notes, being timely with assignments, and passing exams (Owen & Froman, 1988), and is positively linked to almost all successful outcomes for college students (e.g., Honicke & Broadbent, 2016).

More recent research has examined how other socioemotional variables such as sense of belonging to an institution and relationships with key faculty also predict college persistence. Instructor support can be defined as a student’s perception of receiving emotional, practical, and/or academic support from one or more instructors (Nielsen, Newman, Hirst, & Heilemann, 2017). Sense of belonging can be defined as the “psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community” (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Although there are fewer empirical studies on the ability of sense of belonging and instructor support to predict persistence, the few available studies have established their ability to predict persistence.

While social support, instructor support, sense of belonging, and academic self-efficacy are variables positively impacting persistence, stressors and burdens are those that can impeded a student’s path towards graduation. Numerous studies have demonstrated that academic and social stressors strongly predict negative academic and mental health outcomes. However, there are no studies to our knowledge that examine this construct along with those associated with positive outcomes for college students.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether variables demonstrated to predict persistence for college students in general would do so for a group of college students generally not represented in the literature. Additionally, variables associated with positive and negative academic outcomes are tested together in a single model.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants for this study were 578 college students between the ages of 18 and 51 years (mean age = 18.9, $SD = 2.15$). The majority of students identified as female (69%), first-generation college students (63%) of Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity (78.7%), in their first year of college (72.6%).

2.2. Instruments

Participants completed a survey that included a demographic section and measures assessing the constructs of interest. College persistence was measured with six items from the 53-item College Persistence Questionnaire (CPQ; Davidson et al., 2009), while sense of belonging (SB) was measured using a different set of six items from the same scale. Academic self-efficacy was measured using the College Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (CASES; Owen & Froman, 1988). Academic and social burden was assessed with the Academic & Social Burden Inventory (ASBI; Fernando & Zambrano-Morales, 2010); social support was measured using the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL, Cohen & Hoberman, 1983); and instructor support was measured with a scale developed for this study, the Instructor Support Scale (ISS; Zurita-Lopez & Fernando, personal communication, 2019). To conserve space, a table with information about the measures is provided below. All measures demonstrated acceptable reliability (see Table 1 for a summary).

Table 1. Measures completed by participants.

Name of Scale	Construct Assessed	Number of Items	Item Scale	Reliability in this Sample
College Persistence Questionnaire	Desire to persist in college	6 from 53 items	1 (low) to 5 (high)	.72
Sense of Belonging Index	Sense of belonging	6	1 (low) to 5 (high)	.67
College Academic Self-Efficacy Scale	Academic self-efficacy	34	1 (low) to 5 (high)	.92
Academic & Social Burden Index	Stressors of academic and social life	35	0 (low) to 6 (high)	.89
Interpersonal Support Evaluations List	Social support	40	1 (low) to 4 (high)	.78
Instructor Support Scale	Perceived support from an instructor	7	1 (low) to 4 (high)	.71

2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited from a university in Southern California serving an urban, ethnically-diverse, predominantly Latinx group of college students, the majority of who are first in their family to attend or to complete college. A majority of participants were recruited through a subject pool in which students taking a general education class were registered. These students received an hour of research credit for their participation. Other students were recruited by sending an email to faculty with a link to the survey. These faculty provided a few extra credit points to students who took the survey. The survey was conducted via Qualtrics and took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS. We tested two regression models, one for first-generation students and another for non-first-generation students, with the same predictors and same outcome.

3. Results

Both models tested were significant. For first-generation students, the predictors together accounted for 21% of the variance, $R^2 = .21$, $F(4, 320) = 21.72$, $p < .001$, while for non-first-generation students, the predictors accounted for 24% of the variance, $R^2 = .24$, $F(3, 190) = 19.51$, $p < .001$. For first-generation students, sense of belonging was the strongest predictor of persistence ($\beta = .25$), with perceived instructor support ($\beta = .15$) and academic self-efficacy ($\beta = .15$) also predicting persistence ($p < .001$). Social support ($\beta = .12$) also significantly predicted persistence, though more weakly ($p = .02$). For non-first-generation students, academic self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of persistence ($\beta = .28$), with sense of belonging ($\beta = .23$) also significant in the model ($p < .001$). Instructor support also significantly predicted persistence, though more weakly ($p = .03$).

4. Discussion

The results revealed some similarities as well as some interesting differences in predictors of persistence for first-generation and non-first-generation college students. First-generation students likely benefit more from socioemotional experiences such as sense of belonging and perceived instructor support. Academic self-efficacy also predicts persistence for this group of students. Further analyses indicate that academic self-efficacy mediates the relationship between these socioemotional predictors and persistence, where sense of belonging and perceived instructor support lead to greater academic self-efficacy, which in turn significantly predicts persistence. These results are consistent with research on motivated behavior in low-confidence situations, where the support of ‘experts’ acts as scaffolding for novice learners, whose confidence in their own abilities increase as they interact with the experts on a task (Stehr & Grundmann, 2011). For first-generation students who are not always able to get parental advice on how to navigate the myriad of tasks in college, a welcoming and inclusive campus environment and caring faculty help to keep students returning to campus and finish their degree.

For non-first-generation students, belief in one’s own academic abilities was the strongest predictor, along with feeling that one belonged on campus. Perhaps students whose parents attended and/or completed college have less need for instructor support, as they may be getting that socioemotional as well as practical support from their parents.

An interesting finding was that academic and social burden and social support did not significantly predict persistence for this group of students. A prior study with a similar participant group demonstrated that students with high ASB were significantly more likely to consider dropping out of college, compared to those with low ASB (Fernando & Zambrano-Morales, 2010); perhaps “considering dropping out of college”, as a variable, though related to college persistence, is a different psychological construct from the positive behavior of persisting in college. The lack of findings regarding social support could be due to the similarity of this construct with those of instructor support, and high correlation between the two; variance in the former construct may have been accounted for by the variance in the latter.

5. Limitations

The participant pool is not fully representative of the State where the university is located, therefore generalizing the results to a broader population of students warrants caution. The reliability of the Sense of Belonging Index was somewhat low, probably due to the low number of items. Future research should include a scale specifically designed to assess the construct.

6. Implications for policy & intervention

The results taken together indicate that institutions of higher education should spend time and resources fostering a sense of belonging among all students. University administration can encourage faculty and staff to create an inclusive environment by funding and showcasing effective strategies that increase sense of belonging. This sense of belonging can counter ‘imposter syndrome’ that many college students experience as they transition from high school to the more rigorous demands of college. Feeling like one does belong to an academic community can keep students persisting even when they may become discouraged or frustrated with themselves or their institution. Additionally, university administrators should encourage and reward faculty who create inclusive environments in their classrooms using pedagogies that welcome all levels of ability, rather than trying to create highly competitive environments where students experience academic failure. Faculty can also incorporate practices that help students to reflect on their academic self-efficacy and work on those areas where they feel less competent. Strengthening a student’s belief that “Yes, I can do this!” will keep students persisting towards their longed-for goal of graduating with their degree, creating a positive upward mobility spiral which has lasting positive effects for their family and larger community.

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